MEROPE.

A TRAGEDY.

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BY

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φιλοκαλοῦμεν μετ' εὐτελείας.

PREFACE.

I AM not about to defend myself for having taken the story of the following tragedy from classical antiquity. On this subject I have already said all which appears to me to be necessary. For those readers to whom my tragedy will give pleasure, no argument on such a matter is required : one critic, whose fine intelligence it would have been an honour to convince, lives, alas ! no longer : there are others, upon whom no arguments which I could possibly use would produce any impression. The Athenians fined Phrynichus for representing to them their own sufferings : there are critics who would fine us for representing to them anything else.

But, as often as it has happened to me to be blamed or praised for my supposed addiction to the classical school in poetry, I have thought, with real humiliation, how little any works of mine were entitled to rank among the genuine works of that school ; how little they were calculated to give, to readers unac-

quainted with the great creations of classical antiquity, any adequate impression of their form or of their spirit. And yet, whatever the critics may say, there exists, I am convinced, even in England, even in this stronghold of the romantic school, a wide though an ill-informed curiosity on the subject of the so-called classical school, meriting a more complete satisfaction than it has hitherto obtained. Greek art —the antique—classical beauty—a nameless hope and interest attaches, I can often see, to these words, even in the minds of those who have been brought up among the productions of the romantic school; of those who have been taught to consider classicalism as inseparable from coldness, and the antique as another phrase for the unreal. So immortal, so indestructible is the power of true beauty, of consummate form: it may be submerged, but the tradition of it survives: nations arise which know it not, which hardly believe in the report of it; but they, too, are haunted with an indefinable interest in its name, with an inexplicable curiosity as to its nature.

But however the case may be with regard to the curiosity of the public, I have long had the strongest desire to attempt, for my own satisfaction, to come to closer quarters with the form which produces such grand effects in the hands of the Greek masters; to try to obtain, through the medium of a living,

familiar language, a fuller and more intense feeling of that beauty, which, even when apprehended through the medium of a dead language, so powerfully affected me. In his delightful *Life of Goethe*, Mr. Lewes has most truly observed that Goethe's *Iphigeneia* enjoys an inestimable advantage in being written in a language which, being a modern language, is in some sort our own. Not only is it vain to expect that the vast majority of mankind will ever undertake the toil of mastering a dead language, above all, a dead language so difficult as the Greek; but it may be doubted whether even those, whose enthusiasm shrinks from no toil, can ever so thoroughly press into the intimate feeling of works composed in a dead language as their enthusiasm would desire.

I desired to try, therefore, how much of the effectiveness of the Greek poetical forms I could retain in an English poem constructed under the conditions of those forms; of those forms, too, in their severest and most definite expression, in their application to dramatic poetry.

I thought at first that I might accomplish my object by a translation of one of the great works of Æschylus or Sophocles. But a translation is a work not only inferior to the original by the whole difference of talent between the first composer and his translator: it is even inferior to the best which the

translator could do under more inspiring circumstances. No man can do his best with a subject which does not penetrate him: no man can be penetrated by a subject which he does not conceive independently.

Should I take some subject on which we have an extant work by one of the great Greek poets, and treat it independently? Something was to be said for such a course: in antiquity, the same tragic stories were handled by all the tragic poets: Voltaire says truly that to see the same materials differently treated by different poets is most interesting; accordingly, we have an *Œdipus* of Corneille, an *Œdipus* of Voltaire: innumerable are the *Agamemnons*, the *Electras*, the *Antigones*, of the French and Italian poets from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. But the same disadvantage which we have in translating clings to us in our attempt to treat these subjects independently: their treatment by the ancient masters is so overwhelmingly great and powerful that we can henceforth conceive them only as they are there treated: an independent conception of them has become impossible for us: in working upon them we are still, therefore, subject to conditions under which no man can do his best.

It remained to select a subject from among those which had been considered to possess the true requisites of good tragic subjects; on which great works had been composed, but had not survived to chill

emulation by their grandeur. Of such subjects there is, fortunately, no lack. In the writings of Hyginus, a Latin mythographer of uncertain date, we possess a large stock of them. The heroic stories in Hyginus, Maffei, the reformer of the Italian theatre, imagined rightly or wrongly to be the actual summaries of lost Greek dramas: they are, at any rate, subjects on which lost dramas were founded. Maffei counsels the poets of his nation to turn from the inferior subjects on which they were employing themselves, to this "*miniera di tragici argomenti*," this rich mine of subjects for tragedy. Lessing, the great German critic, echoes Maffei's counsel, but adds a warning. "Yes," he cries, "the great subjects are there, but they await an intelligent eye to regard them: they can be handled, not by the great majority of poets, but only by the small minority."

Among these subjects presented in the collection of Hyginus, there is one which has long attracted my interest, from the testimony of the ancients to its excellence, and from the results which that testimony has called forth from the emulation of the moderns. That subject is the story of Merope. To the effectiveness of the situations which this story offered, Aristotle and Plutarch have borne witness: a celebrated tragedy upon it, probably by Euripides, existed in antiquity. "The *Cresphontes* of Euripides is lost," exclaims the reviewer of Voltaire's *Merope*, a jesuit, and not unwilling to conciliate the terrible

pupil of his order ; "the *Cresphontes* of Euripides is lost: M. de Voltaire has restored it to us." "Aristotle," says Voltaire, "Aristotle, in his immortal work on Poetry, does not hesitate to affirm that the recognition between Merope and her son was the most interesting moment of the Greek stage." Aristotle affirms no such thing ; but he *does* say that the story of Merope, like the stories of Iphigeneia and Antiope, supplies an example of a recognition of the most affecting kind. And Plutarch says ; "Look at Merope in the tragedy, lifting up the axe against her own son as being the murderer of her own son, and crying—

> ὁσιωτέραν δὴ τήνδ' ἔγω δίδωμί σοι
> πληγήν ——

> A more just stroke than that thou gav'st my son,
> Take ——

What an agitation she makes in the theatre ! how she fills the spectators with terror lest she should be too quick for the old man who is trying to stop her, and should strike the lad ! "

It is singular that neither Aristotle nor Plutarch names the author of the tragedy : scholiasts and other late writers quote from it as from a work of Euripides ; but the only writer of authority who names him as its author is Cicero. About fifty lines of it have come down to us : the most important of these remains are the passage just quoted, and a choral ad-

dress to Peace ; of these I have made use in my tragedy, translating the former, and of the latter adopting the general thought, that of rejoicing at the return of peace : the other fragments consist chiefly of detached moral sentences, of which I have not made any use.

It may be interesting to give some account of the more celebrated of those modern works which have been founded upon this subject. But before I proceed to do this, I will state what accounts we have of the story itself.

These proceed from three sources — Apollodorus, Pausanias, and Hyginus. Of their accounts that of Apollodorus is the most ancient, that of Pausanias the most historically valuable, and that of Hyginus the fullest. I will begin with the last-named writer.

Hyginus says : —

" Merope sent away and concealed her infant son. Polyphontes sought for him everywhere, and promised gold to whoever should slay him. He, when he grew up, laid a plan to avenge the murder of his father and brothers. In pursuance of this plan he came to king Polyphontes and asked for the promised gold, saying that he had slain the son of Cresphontes and Merope. The king ordered him to be hospitably entertained, intending to inquire further of him. He, being very tired, went to sleep, and an old man, who was the channel through whom the mother and son used to communicate, arrives at this moment in tears, bringing word to Merope that her son had disap-

peared from his protector's house. Merope, believing that the sleeping stranger is the murderer of her son, comes into the guest-chamber with an axe, not knowing that he whom she would slay was her son : the old man recognised him, and withheld Merope from slaying him. After the recognition had taken place, Merope, to prepare the way for her vengeance, affected to be reconciled with Polyphontes. The king, overjoyed, celebrated a sacrifice : his guest, pretending to strike the sacrificial victim, slew the king, and so got back his father's kingdom."

Apollodorus says : —

"Cresphontes had not reigned long in Messenia when he was murdered together with two of his sons. And Polyphontes reigned in his stead, he, too, being of the family of Hercules ; and he had for his wife, against her will, Merope, the widow of the murdered king. But Merope had borne to Cresphontes a third son, called Æpytus : him she gave to her own father to bring up. He, when he came to man's estate, returned secretly to Messenia, and slew Polyphontes and the other murderers of his father."

Pausanias adds nothing to the facts told by Apollodorus, except that he records the proceedings of Cresphontes which had provoked the resentment of his Dorian nobles, and led to his murder. His statements on this point will be found in the Historical Introduction which follows this Preface.

The account of the modern fortunes of the story of Merope is a curious chapter in literary history. In the early age of the French theatre this subject attracted the notice of a great man, if not a great poet, the cardinal Richelieu. At his theatre, in the Palais Royal, was brought out, in 1641, a tragedy under the title of *Téléphonte*, the name given by Hyginus to the surviving son of Merope. This piece is said by Voltaire to have contained about a hundred lines by the great cardinal, who had, as is well known, more bent than genius for dramatic composition. There his vein appears to have dried up, and the rest is by an undistinguished hand. This tragedy was followed by another on the same subject from the resident minister, at Paris, of the celebrated Christina of Sweden. Two pieces with the title of *Merope*, besides others on the same story, but with different names, were brought out at Paris before the *Merope* of Voltaire appeared. It seems that none of them created any memorable impression.

The first eminent success was in Italy. There too, as in France, more than one *Merope* was early produced: one of them in the sixteenth century, by a Count Torelli, composed with choruses: but the first success was achieved by Maffei. Scipio Maffei, called by Voltaire the Sophocles and Varro of Verona, was a noble and cultivated person. He became in middle life the historian of his native place, Verona ;

and may claim the honour of having partly anticipated Niebuhr in his famous discovery, in the Capitular library of that city, of the lost works of Gaius, the Roman lawyer. He visited France and England, and received an honorary degree at Oxford. But in earlier life he signalised himself as the reviver of the study of Greek literature in Italy; and with the aim to promote that study, and to rescue the Italian theatre from the debasement into which it had fallen, he brought out at Modena, in 1713, his tragedy of *Merope*.

The effect was immense. "Let the Greek and Roman writers give place: here is a greater production than the *Œdipus!*" wrote, in Latin verse, an enthusiastic admirer. In the winter following its appearance, the tragedy kept constant possession of the stage in Italy; and its reputation travelled into France and England. In England a play was produced in 1731, by a writer called Jeffreys, professedly taken from the *Merope* of Maffei. But at this period a love-intrigue was considered indispensable in a tragedy: Voltaire was even compelled by the actors to introduce one in his *Œdipus:* and although in Maffei's work there is no love-intrigue, the English adapter felt himself bound to supply the deficiency. Accordingly he makes, if we may trust Voltaire, the unknown son of Merope in love with one of her maids of honour: he is brought before his mother as his

own supposed murderer: she gives him the choice of death by the dagger or by poison: he chooses the latter, drinks off the poison and falls insensible: but reappears at the end of the tragedy safe and sound, a friend of the maid of honour having substituted a sleeping-draught for the poison. Such is Voltaire's account of this English *Merope*, of which I have not been able to obtain sight. Voltaire is apt to exaggerate; but the work was, without doubt, sufficiently absurd. A better English translation, by Ayre, appeared in 1740. I have taken from Maffei a line in my tragedy —

> "Tyrants think, him they murder not, they spare."

Maffei has —

> "Ecco il don dei tiranni: a lor rassembra,
> Morte non dando altrui, di dar la vita."

Maffei makes some important changes in the story as told by its ancient relaters. In his tragedy the unknown prince, Merope's son, is called Egisto: Merope herself is not, as the ancients represented her, at the time of her son's return the wife of Polyphontes, but is repelling the importunate offer of his hand by her husband's murderer: Egisto does not, like Orestes, know his own parentage, and return secretly to his own home in order to wreak vengeance, in concert with his mother, upon his father's

murderer: he imagines himself the son of Messenian parents, but of a rank not royal, intrusted to an old man, Polidoro, to be brought up; and is driven by curiosity to quit his protector and visit his native land. He enters Messenia, and is attacked by a robber, whom he kills. The blood upon his dress attracts the notice of some soldiers of Polyphontes whom he falls in with; he is seized and brought to the royal palace. On hearing his story, a suspicion siezes Merope, who has heard from Polidoro that her son has quitted him, that the slain person must have been her own son. The suspicion is confirmed by the sight of a ring on the finger of Egisto, which had belonged to Cresphontes, and which Merope supposes the unknown stranger to have taken from her murdered son: she twice attempts his life: the arrival of Polidoro at last clears up the mystery for her; but at the very moment when she recognises Egisto, they are separated, and no interview of recognition takes place between the mother and son. Finally, the prince is made acquainted with his origin, and kills Polyphontes in the manner described by Hyginus.

This is an outline of the story as arranged by Maffei. This arrangement has been followed, in the main, by all his successors. His treatment of the subject has, I think, some grave defects, which I shall presently notice: but his work has much nobleness and feeling;

it seems to me to possess, on the whole, more merit of a strictly poetical kind than any of the subsequent works upon the same subject.

Voltaire's curiosity, which never slumbered, was attracted by the success of Maffei. It was not until 1736, however, when his interest in Maffei's tragedy had been increased by a personal acquaintance with its author, that his own *Merope* was composed. It was not brought out upon the stage until 1743. It was received, like its Italian predecessor, with an enthusiasm which, assuredly, the English *Merope* will not excite. From its exhibition dates the practice of calling for a successful author to appear at the close of his piece: the audience were so much enchanted with Voltaire's tragedy, that they insisted on seeing the man who had given them such delight. To Corneille had been paid the honour of reserving for him the same seat in the theatre at all representations; but neither he nor Racine were ever "called for."

Voltaire, in a long complimentary letter, dedicated his tragedy to Maffei. He had at first intended, he says, merely to translate the *Merope* of his predecessor, which he so greatly admired: he still admired it; above all, he admired it because it possessed *simplicity;* that simplicity which is, he says, his own idol. But he has to deal with a Parisian audience, with an audience who have been glutted

with masterpieces until their delicacy has become excessive; until they can no longer support the simple and rustic air, the details of country life, which Maffei had imitated from the Greek theatre. The audience of Paris, of that city in which some thirty thousand spectators daily witnessed theatrical performances, and thus acquired, by constant practice, a severity of taste, to which the ten thousand Athenians who saw tragedies but four times a year could not pretend—of that terrible city, in which

"Et pueri nasum rhinocerotis habent:"

this audience loved simplicity, indeed, but not the same simplicity which was loved at Athens and imitated by Maffei. "I regret this," says Voltaire, "for how fond I am of simple nature! but, *il faut se plier au goût d'une nation*, one must accommodate oneself to the taste of one's countrymen."

He does himself less than justice. When he objects, indeed, to that in Maffei's work which is truly "naïf et rustique," to that which is truly in a Greek spirit, he is wrong. His objection, for instance, to the passage in which the old retainer of Cresphontes describes, in the language of a man of his class, the rejoicings which celebrated his master's accession, is, in my opinion, perfectly groundless. But the wonderful penetration and clear sense of Voltaire seizes, in

general, upon really weak points in Maffei's work: upon points which, to an Athenian, would have seemed as weak as they seemed to Voltaire. A French audience, he says, would not have borne to witness Polyphontes making love to Merope, whose husband he had murdered: neither would an Athenian audience have borne it. To hear Polyphontes say to Merope "*Io t'amo*," even though he is but feigning, for state purposes, a love which he has not really, shocks the natural feeling of mankind. Our usages, says Voltaire, would not permit that Merope should twice rush upon her son to slay him, once with a javelin, the next time with an axe. The French dramatic usages, then, would on this point have perfectly agreed with the laws of reason and good taste: this repetition of the same incident is tasteless and unmeaning. It is a grave fault of art, says Voltaire, that, at the critical moment of recognition, not a word passes between Merope and her son. He is right; a noble opportunity is thus thrown away. He objects to Maffei's excessive introduction of conversations between subaltern personages: these conversations are, no doubt, tiresome. Other points there are, with respect to which we may say that Voltaire's objections would have been perfectly sound had Maffei really done what is imputed to him: but he has not. Voltaire has a talent for misrepresentation, and he often uses it unscrupulously.

He never used it more unscrupulously than on this occasion. The French public, it appears, took Voltaire's expressions of obligation to Maffei somewhat more literally than Voltaire liked: they imagined that the French *Merope* was rather a successful adaptation of the Italian *Merope* than an original work. It was necessary to undeceive them. A letter appeared, addressed by a M. de La Lindelle to Voltaire, in which Voltaire is reproached for his excessive praises of Maffei's tragedy, in which that work is rigorously analysed, its faults remorselessly displayed. No merit is allowed to it: it is a thoroughly bad piece on a thoroughly good subject. Lessing, who, in 1768, in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, reviewed Voltaire's *Merope* at great length, evidently has divined, what is the truth, that M. de La Lindelle and Voltaire are one and the same person. It required indeed but little of the great Lessing's sagacity to divine that. An unknown M. de La Lindelle does not write one letter in that style of unmatched incisiveness and animation, that style compared to which the style of Lord Macaulay is tame, and the style of Isocrates is obscure, and then pass for ever from the human stage. M. de La Lindelle *is* Voltaire; but that does not hinder Voltaire from replying to him with perfect gravity. "You terrify me!" he exclaims to his correspondent — that is, to himself: "you terrify me! you are as hypercritical as Scaliger. Why not

fix your attention rather on the beauties of M. Maffei's work, than on its undoubted defects? It is my sincere opinion that, in some points, M. Maffei's *Merope* is superior to my own." The transaction is one of the most signal instances of literary sharp practice on record. To this day, in the ordinary editions of Voltaire, M. de La Lindelle's letter figures, in the correspondence prefixed to the tragedy of *Merope*, as the letter of an authentic person; although the true history of the proceeding has long been well known, and Voltaire's conduct in it was severely blamed by La Harpe.

Voltaire had said that his *Merope* was occasioned by that of Maffei. "*Occasioned*," says Lessing, "is too weak a word: M. de Voltaire's tragedy owes *everything* to that of M. Maffei." This is not just. We have seen the faults in Maffei's work pointed out by Voltaire. Some of these faults he avoids: at the same time he discerns, with masterly clearness, the true difficulties of the subject. "Comment se prendre," he says, "pour faire penser à Mérope que son fils est l'assassin de son fils même?" That is one problem; here is another: "Comment trouver des motifs nécessaires pour que Polyphonte veuille épouser Mérope?" Let us see which of Maffei's faults Voltaire avoids: let us see how far he solves the problems which he himself has enunciated.

The story, in its main outline, is the same with

Voltaire as with Maffei ; but in some particulars it is altered, so as to have more probability. Like Maffei's Egisto, Voltaire's Égisthe does not know his own origin : like him, youthful curiosity drives him to quit his aged protector, and to re-enter Messenia. Like him he has an encounter with a stranger, whom he slays, and whose blood, staining his clothes, leads to his apprehension. But this stranger is an emissary of Polyphontes, sent to effect the young prince's murder. This is an improvement upon the robber of Maffei, who has no connexion whatever with the action of the piece. Suspicion falls upon Égisthe on the same grounds as those on which it fell upon Egisto. The suspicion is confirmed in Égisthe's case by the appearance of a coat of armour, as, in Egisto's case, it was confirmed by the appearance of a ring. In neither case does Merope seem to have sufficient cause to believe the unknown youth to be her son's murderer. In Voltaire's tragedy, Merope is ignorant until the end of the third act that Polyphontes is her husband's murderer ; nay, she believes that Cresphontes, murdered by the brigands of Pylos, has been avenged by Polyphontes, who claims her gratitude on that ground. He desires to marry her in order to strengthen his position. " Of interests in the state," he says,

> " Il ne reste aujourd'hui que le vôtre et le mien :
> Nous devons l'un à l'autre un mutuel soutien."

Voltaire thus departs widely from the tradition ; but he can represent Merope as entertaining and discussing the tyrant's offer of marriage without shocking our feelings. The style, however, in which Voltaire makes Polyphontes urge his addresses, would sometimes, I think, have wounded a Greek's taste as much as Maffei's *Io t'amo* —

> "Je sais que vos appas, encore dans le printemps,
> Pourraient s'effaroucher de l'hiver de mes ans."

What an address from a stern, care-haunted ruler to a widowed queen, the mother of a grown-up son! The tragedy proceeds ; and Merope is about to slay her son, when his aged guardian arrives and makes known to her who the youth is. This is as in Maffei's piece ; but Voltaire avoids the absurdity of the double attempt by Merope on her son's life. Yet he, too, permits Égisthe to leave the stage without exchanging a word with his mother: the very fault which he justly censures in Maffei. Égisthe, indeed, does not even learn, on this occasion, that Merope is his mother: the recognition is thus cut in half. The second half of it comes afterwards, in the presence of Polyphontes ; and his presence imposes, of course, a restraint upon the mother and son. Merope is driven, by fear for her son's safety, to consent to marry Polyphontes, although his full guilt is now revealed to

her; but she is saved by her son, who slays the tyrant in the manner told in the tradition and followed by Maffei.

What is the real merit of Voltaire's tragedy? We must forget the rhymed Alexandrines; that metre, faulty not so much because it is disagreeable in itself, as because it has in it something which is essentially unsuited to perfect tragedy; that metre which is so indefensible, and which Voltaire has so ingeniously laboured to defend. He takes a noble passage from Racine's *Phédre*, alters words so as to remove the rhyme, and asks if the passage now produces as good an effect as before. But a fine passage which we are used to we like in the form in which we are used to it, with all its faults. Prose is, undoubtedly, a less noble vehicle for tragedy than verse; yet we should not like the fine passages in Goethe's prose tragedy of *Egmont* the better for having them turned into verse. Besides, it is not clear that the unrhymed Alexandrine is a better tragic metre than the rhymed. Voltaire says that usage has now established the metre in France, and that the dramatic poet has no escape from it. For him and his contemporaries this is a valid plea; but how much one regrets that the poetical feeling of the French nation did not, at a period when such an alteration was still possible, change for a better this unsuitable tragic metre, as the Greeks, in the early period of their tragic art,

changed for the more fitting iambus their trochaic tetrameter.

To return to Voltaire's *Merope*. It is admirably constructed, and must have been most effective on the stage. One feels, as one reads it, that a poet gains something by living amongst a population who have the nose of the rhinoceros: his ingenuity becomes sharpened. This work has, besides, that stamp of a prodigious talent which none of Voltaire's works are without; it has vigour, clearness, rapid movement; it has lines which are models of terse observation—

> "Le premier qui fut roi fut un soldat heureux :
> Qui sert bien son pays n'a pas besoin d'aieux."

It has lines which are models of powerful, animated, rhetoric—

MÉROPE.

"Courons à Polyphonte — implorons son appui."

NARBAS.

"N'implorez que les dieux, et ne craignez que lui."

What it wants is a charm of poetical feeling, which Racine's tragedies possess, and which has given to them the decisive superiority over those of Voltaire. He has managed his story with great adroitness; but he has departed from the original tradition yet further than Maffei. He has avoided several of Maffei's faults: why has he not avoided his fault of omitting

to introduce, at the moment of recognition, a scene between the mother and son? Lessing thinks that he wanted the double recognition in order to enable him to fill his prescribed space, that terrible "carrière de cinq actes" of which he so grievously complains. I believe, rather, that he cut the recognition in two, in order to produce for his audience two distinct shocks of surprise: for to inspire *surprise*, Voltaire considered the dramatic poet's true aim; an opinion which, as we shall hereafter see, sometimes led him astray.

Voltaire's *Merope* was adapted for the English stage by Aaron Hill, a singular man; by turns, poet, soldier, theatrical manager, and Lord Peterborough's private secretary; but always, and above all, an indefatigable projector. He originated a beech-oil company, a Scotch timber company, and a plan to colonise Florida. He published Essays on Reducing the Price of Coals, on Repairing Dagenham Breach, and on English Grape Wines; an epic poem on Gideon, a tragedy called *The Fatal Vision, or Fall of Siam*, and a translation of Voltaire's *Zaïre*. His *Merope* was his last work. It appeared in 1749 with a dedication to Lord Bolingbroke; it was brought on the stage with great success, Garrick acting in it; and Hill, who was at this time in poverty, and who died soon after, received a considerable sum from his benefit nights. I have not seen this work, which

is not included in the Inchbald collection of acted plays. Warton calls Aaron Hill an affected and fustian writer, and this seems to have been his reputation among his contemporaries. His *Zara*, which I have seen, has the fault of so much of English literature of the second class — an incurable defect of *style*.

One other *Merope* remains to be noticed — the *Merope* of Alfieri. In this tragedy, which appeared in 1783, Alfieri has entirely followed Maffei and Voltaire. He seems to have followed Maffei in the first half of it; Voltaire in the second. His Polyphontes, however, does not make love to Merope: desiring to obtain her hand, in order by this marriage to make the Messenians forget their attachment to Cresphontes, he appeals to her self-interest. "You are miserable," he says; "but a throne is a great consolation. A throne is—

la sola
Non vile ammenda, che al fallir mio resti."

Egisto, in Alfieri's piece, falls under suspicion from the blood left on his clothes in a struggle with a stranger, whom he kills and throws into the river Pamisus. The suspicion is confirmed by the appearance of a girdle recognised by Merope as having belonged to her son; as it was confirmed in Maffei's piece by the appearance of a ring, in Voltaire's, by that of a coat of armour. The rest is, in the main, as with Voltaire, except that Alfieri makes Polyphontes

perish upon the stage, under circumstances of considerable improbability.

This work of Alfieri has the characteristic merit, and the characteristic fault, of Alfieri's tragedies: it has the merit of elevation, and the fault of narrowness. *Narrow elevation;* that seems to me exactly to express the quality of Alfieri's poetry: he is a noble-minded, deeply interesting man, but a monotonous poet.

A mistake, a grave mistake it seems to me, in the treatment of their subject, is common to Maffei, Voltaire, and Alfieri. They have abandoned the tradition where they had better have followed it; they have followed it, where they had better have abandoned it.

The tradition is a great matter to a poet; it is an unspeakable support; it gives him the feeling that he is treading on solid ground. Aristotle tells the tragic poet that he must not destroy the received stories. A noble and accomplished living poet, M. Manzoni, has, in an admirable dissertation, developed this thesis of the importance to the poet of a basis of tradition. Its importance I feel so strongly, that, where driven to invent in the false story told by Merope's son, as by Orestes in the *Electra*, of his own death, I could not satisfy myself until I discovered in Pausanias a tradition, which I took for my basis, of an Arcadian hunter drowned in the lake Stymphalus, down one of

those singular Katabothra, or chasms in the limestone rock, so well known in Greece, in a manner similar to that in which Æpytus is represented to have perished.

Maffei did right, I think, in altering the ancient tradition where it represents Merope as actually the wife of Polyphontes. It revolts our feeling to consider her as married to her husband's murderer; and it is no great departure from the tradition to represent her as sought in marriage by him, but not yet obtained. But why did Maffei (for he, it will be remembered, gave the story its modern arrangement, which Voltaire and Alfieri have, in all its leading points, followed), why did Maffei abandon that part of the tradition which represents Æpytus, the Messenian prince, as acquainted with his own origin? Why did he and his followers prefer to attribute to curiosity a return which the tradition attributed to a far more tragic motive? Why did they compel themselves to invent a machinery of robbers, assassins, guards, rings, girdles, and I know not what, to effect that which the tradition effects in a far simpler manner, to place Æpytus before his mother as his own murderer? Lessing imagines that Maffei, who wished to depict, above all, the maternal anxiety of Merope, conceived that this anxiety would be more naturally and powerfully awakened by the thought of her child reared in hardship and obscurity as a

poor man's son, than by the thought of him reared in splendour as a prince in the palace of her own father. But what a conception of the sorrow of a queen, whose husband has been murdered, and whose son is an exile from his inheritance, to suppose that such a sorrow is enhanced by the thought that her child is rudely housed and plainly fed; to assume that it would take a less tragic complexion if she knew that he lived in luxury! No; the true tragic motive of Merope's sorrow is elsewhere: the tradition amply supplied it.

Here, then, the moderns have invented amiss, because they have invented needlessly; because, on this point, the tradition, as it stood, afforded perfect materials to the tragic poet: and, by Maffei's change, not a higher tragic complication, but merely a greater puzzle and intricacy is produced. I come now to a point on which the tradition might with advantage, as I think, have been set aside; and that is, the character of Polyphontes.

Yet, on this point, to speak of *setting aside the tradition* is to speak too strongly; for the tradition is here not complete. Neither Pausanias nor Apollodorus mention circumstances which definitely fix the character of Polyphontes; Hyginus, no doubt, represents him as a villain, and, if Hyginus follows Euripides, Euripides also thus represented him. Euripides may possibly have done so; yet a purer tragic feeling, it

seems to me, is produced, if Polyphontes is represented as not wholly black and inexcusable, than if he is represented as a mere monster of cruelty and hypocrisy. Aristotle's profound remark is well known, that the tragic personage whose ruin is represented, should be a personage neither eminently good, nor yet one brought to ruin by sheer iniquity; nay, that his character should incline rather to good than to bad, but that he should have some fault which impels him to his fall. For, as he explains, the two grand tragic feelings, pity and terror, which it is the business of tragedy to excite, will not be excited by the spectacle of the ruin of a mere villain; since pity is for those who suffer undeservedly, and such a man suffers deservedly: terror is excited by the fall of one of like nature with ourselves, and we feel that the mere villain is not as ourselves. Aristotle, no doubt, is here speaking, above all, of the Protagonist, or principal personage of the drama; but the noblest tragic poets of Greece rightly extended their application of the truth on which his remark is based to all the personages of the drama: neither the Creon of Sophocles, nor the Clytemnestra of Æschylus, are wholly inexcusable; in none of the extant dramas of Æschylus or Sophocles is there a character which is entirely bad. For such a character we must go to Euripides; we must go to an art — wonderful indeed, for I entirely dissent from the unreserved disparagers of

this great poet—but an art of less moral significance than the art of Sophocles and Æschylus; we must go to tragedies like the *Hecuba*, for villains like Polymestor.

What is the main dramatic difficulty of the story of Merope, as usually treated? It is, as Alfieri rightly saw, that the interest naturally declines from the moment of Merope's recognition of her son; that the destruction of the tyrant is not, after this, matter of interest enough to affect us deeply. This is true, if Polyphontes is a mere villain. It is not true, if he is one for the ruin of whom we may, in spite of his crime, feel a profound compassion. Then our interest in the story lasts to the end: for to the very end we are inspired with the powerful tragic emotions of commiseration and awe. Pausanias states circumstances which suggest the possibility of representing Polyphontes, not as a mere cruel and selfish tyrant, but as a man whose crime was a truly tragic fault, the error of a noble nature. Assume such a nature in him, and the turn of circumstances in the drama takes a new aspect: Merope and her son triumph, but the fall of their foe leaves us awestruck and compassionate: the story issues *tragically*, as Aristotle has truly said that the best tragic stories ought to issue.

Neither Maffei, nor Voltaire, nor Alfieri have drawn Polyphontes with a character to inspire any

feeling but aversion, with any traits of nobleness to mitigate our satisfaction at his death. His character being such, it is difficult to render his anxiety to obtain Merope's hand intelligible, for Merope's situation is not such as to make her enmity really dangerous to Polyphontes; he has, therefore, no sufficient motive of self-interest, and the nobler motives of reparation and pacification could have exercised, on such a character, no force. Voltaire accordingly, whose keen eye no weak place of this kind escaped, felt his difficulty. "Neither M. Maffei nor I," he confesses, "have assigned any sufficient motives for the desire of Polyphontes to marry Merope."

To criticise is easier than to create; and if I have been led, in this review of the fortunes of my story, to find fault with the works of others, I do not on that account assume that I have myself produced a work which is not a thousand times more faulty.

It remains to say something, for those who are not familiar with the Greek dramatic forms, of the form in which this tragedy is cast. Greek tragedy, as is well known, took its origin from the songs of a chorus, and the stamp of its origin remained for ever impressed upon it. A chorus, or band of dancers, moving around the altar of Bacchus, sang the adventures of the god. To this band Thespis joined an actor, who held dialogue with the chorus, and who

was called ὑποκριτής, *the answerer,* because he answered the songs of the chorus. The drama thus commenced; for the dialogue of this actor with the chorus brought before the audience some action of Bacchus, or of one of the heroes; this action, narrated by the actor, was commented on in song, at certain intervals, by the chorus alone. Æschylus added a second actor, thus making the character of the representation more *dramatic,* for the chorus was never itself so much an actor as a hearer and observer of the actor: Sophocles added a third. These three actors might successively personate several characters in the same piece ; but to three actors and a chorus the dramatic poet limited himself: only in a single piece of Sophocles, not brought out until after his death, was the employment of a fourth actor, it appears, necessary.

The chorus consisted, in the time of Sophocles, of fifteen persons. After their first entrance they remained before the spectators, without withdrawing, until the end of the piece. Their place was in the orchestra ; that of the actors was upon the stage. The orchestra was a circular space, like the pit of our theatres: the chorus arrived in it by side-entrances, and not by the stage. In the centre of the orchestra was the altar of Bacchus, around which the chorus originally danced; but in dramatic representations their place was between this altar and

the stage: here they stood, a little lower than the persons on the stage, but looking towards them, and holding, through their leaders, conversation with them: then, at pauses in the action, the united chorus sang songs expressing their feelings at what was happening upon the stage, making, as they sang, certain measured stately movements between the stage and the altar, and occasionally standing still. Steps led from the orchestra to the stage, and the chorus, or some members of it, might thus, if necessary, join the actors on the stage; but this seldom happened, the proper place for the chorus was the orchestra. The dialogue of the chorus with the actors on the stage passed generally in the ordinary form of dramatic dialogue; but, on occasions where strong feeling was excited, the dialogue took a lyrical form. Long dialogues of this kind sometimes took place between the leaders of the chorus and one of the actors upon the stage, their burden being a lamentation for the dead.

The Greek theatres were vast, and open to the sky; the actors, masked, and in a somewhat stiff tragic costume, were to be regarded from a considerable distance: a solemn, clearly marked style of gesture, a sustained tone of declamation, were thus rendered necessary. Under these conditions, intricate by-play, rapid variations in the action, requiring great mobility, ever-changing shades of tone and

gesture in the actor, were impossible. Broad and simple effects were, under these conditions, above all to be aimed at; a profound and clear impression was to be effected. Unity of plan in the action, and symmetry in the treatment of it, were indispensable. The action represented, therefore, was to be a single, rigorously developed action; the masses of the composition were to be balanced, each bringing out the other into stronger and distincter relief. In the best tragedies, not only do the divisions of the full choral songs accurately correspond to one another, but the divisions of the lyrical dialogue, nay, even the divisions of the regular dramatic dialogue, form corresponding members, of which one member is the answer, the counter-stroke to the other; and an indescribable sense of distinctness and depth of impression is thus produced.

From what has been said, the reader will see that the Greek tragic forms were not chosen as being, in the nature of things, the best tragic forms; such would be a wholly false conception of them. They are an adaptation to dramatic purposes, under certain theatrical conditions, of forms previously existing for other purposes; that adaptation at which the Greeks, after several stages of improvement, finally rested. The laws of Greek tragic art, therefore, are not exclusive; they are for Greek dramatic art itself, but they do not pronounce other modes of dramatic art unlawful; they are, at most,

prophecies of the improbability of dramatic success under other conditions. "Tragedy," says Aristotle, in a remarkable passage, "after going through many changes, got the nature which suited it, and there it stopped. Whether or no the kinds of tragedy are yet exhausted," he presently adds, "tragedy being considered either in itself, or in respect to the stage, I shall not now inquire." Travelling in a certain path, the spirit of man arrived at Greek tragedy; travelling in other paths, it may arrive at other kinds of tragedy.

But it cannot be denied that the Greek tragic forms, although not the only possible tragic forms, satisfy, in the most perfect manner, some of the most urgent demands of the human spirit. If, on the one hand, the human spirit demands variety and the widest possible range, it equally demands, on the other hand, depth and concentration in its impressions. Powerful thought and emotion, flowing in strongly marked channels, make a stronger impression : this is the main reason why a metrical form is a more effective vehicle for them than prose : in prose there is more freedom, but, in the metrical form, the very limit gives a sense precision and emphasis. This sense of emphatic distinctness in our impressions rises, as the thought and emotion swell higher and higher without overflowing their boundaries, to a lofty sense of the mastery of the human spirit over its own stormiest

agitations ; and this, again, conducts us to a state of feeling which it is the highest aim of tragedy to produce, to *a sentiment of sublime acquiescence in the course of fate, and in the dispensations of human life.*

What has been said explains, I think, the reason of the effectiveness of the severe forms of Greek tragedy, with its strongly marked boundaries, with its recurrence, even in the most agitating situations, of mutually replying masses of metrical arrangement. Sometimes the agitation becomes overwhelming, and the correspondence is for a time lost, the torrent of feeling flows for a space without check : this disorder amid the general order produces a powerful effect; but the balance is restored before the tragedy closes : the final sentiment in the mind must be one not of trouble, but of acquiescence.

This sentiment of acquiescence is, no doubt, a sentiment of *repose ;* and, therefore, I cannot agree with Mr. Lewes when he says, in his remarks on Goethe's *Iphigeneia*, that "the Greek Drama is distinguished by its absence of repose ; by the currents of passion being for ever kept in agitation." I entirely agree, however, in his criticism of Goethe's tragedy ; of that noble poem which Schiller so exactly characterised when he said that it was "full of soul :" I entirely agree with him when he says that "the tragic situation in the story of Iphigeneia is not touched by Goethe ; that his tragedy addresses the conscience rather than the emotions." But Goethe does not err

from Greek ideas when he thinks that there is repose in tragedy : he errs from Greek practice in the mode in which he strives to produce that repose. Sophocles does not produce the sentiment of repose, of acquiescence, by inculcating it, by avoiding agitating circumstances: he produces it by exhibiting to us the most agitating matter under the conditions of the severest form. Goethe has truly recognised that this sentiment is the grand final effect of Greek tragedy : but he produces it, not in the manner of Sophocles, but, as Mr. Lewes has most ably pointed out, in a manner of his own ; he produces it by inculcating it ; by avoiding agitating matter ; by keeping himself in the domain of the soul and conscience, not in that of the passions.

I have now to speak of the chorus ; for of this, as of the other forms of Greek tragedy, it is not enough, considering how Greek tragedy arose, to show that the Greeks used it ; it is necessary to show that it is effective. Johnson says, that "it could only be by long prejudice and the bigotry of learning that Milton could prefer the ancient tragedies, with their encumbrance of a chorus, to the exhibitions of the French and English stages:" and his tragedy of *Irene* sufficiently proves that he himself, in his practice, adopted Greek art as arranged at Paris, by those

> "Juges plus éclairés que ceux qui dans Athène
> Firent naître et fleurir les lois de Melpomène ; "

as Voltaire calls them in the prologue to his *Éryphile.* Johnson merely calls the chorus an encumbrance. Voltaire, who, in his *Œdipus,* had made use of the chorus in a singular manner, argued, at a later period, against its introduction. Voltaire is always worth listening to, because his keenness of remark is always suggestive. "In an interesting piece the intrigue generally requires," says Voltaire, "that the principal actors should have secrets to tell one another — *Eh ! le moyen de dire son secret à tout un peuple.* And, if the songs of the chorus allude to what has already happened, they must," he says, "be tiresome; if they allude to what is about to happen, their effect will be to *dérober le plaisir de la surprise.*" How ingenious, and how entirely in Voltaire's manner! The sense to be appealed to in tragedy is *curiosity;* the impression to be awakened in us is *surprise.* But the Greeks thought differently. For them, the aim of tragedy was *profound moral impression:* and the ideal spectator, as Schlegel and Müller have called the chorus, was designed to enable the actual spectator to feel his own impressions more distinctly and more deeply. The chorus was, at each stage in the action, to collect and weigh the impressions which the action would at that stage naturally make on a pious and thoughtful mind; and was at last, at the end of the tragedy, when the issue of the action appeared, to strike the final balance. If the

feeling with which the actual spectator regarded the course of the tragedy could be deepened by reminding him of what was past, or by indicating to him what was to come, it was the province of the ideal spectator so to deepen it. To combine, to harmonise, to deepen for the spectator the feelings naturally excited in him by the sight of what was passing upon the stage — this is one grand effect produced by the chorus in Greek tragedy.

There is another. Coleridge observes that Shakspeare, after one of his grandest scenes, often plunges, as if to relax and relieve himself, into a scene of buffoonery. After tragic situations of the greatest intensity, a desire for relief and relaxation is no doubt natural, both to the poet and to the spectator; but the finer feeling of the Greeks found this relief, not in buffoonery, but in lyrical song. The noble and natural relief from the emotion produced by tragic events is in the transition to the emotion produced by lyric poetry, not in the contrast and shock of a totally opposite order of feelings. The relief afforded to excited feeling by lyrical song every one has experienced at the opera: the delight and facility of this relief renders so universal the popularity of the opera, of this "*beau monstre*," which still, as in Voltaire's time, "*étouffe Melpomène.*" But in the opera, the lyrical element, the element of feeling and relaxation, is in excess: the dramatic element, the element of intellect

and labour, is in defect. In the best Greek tragedy, the lyrical element occupies its true place; it is the relief and solace in the stress and conflict of the action; it is not the substantive business.

Few can have read the *Samson Agonistes* of Milton without feeling that the chorus imparts a peculiar and noble effect to that poem; but I regret that Milton determined, induced probably by his preference for Euripides, to adopt, in the songs of the chorus, "the measure," as he himself says, "called by the Greeks Monostrophic, or rather Apolelymenon, without regard had to Strophe, Antistrophe, or Epode." In this relaxed form of the later Greek tragedy, the means are sacrificed by which the chorus could produce, within the limits of a single choric song, the same effect which it was their business, as we have seen, to produce in the tragedy as a whole. The regular correspondence of part with part, the antithesis, in answering stanzas, of thought to thought, feeling to feeling, with the balance of the whole struck in one independent final stanza or epode, is lost; something of the peculiar distinctness and symmetry, which constitute the vital force of the Greek tragic forms, is thus forfeited. The story of Samson, although it has no mystery or complication, to inspire, like tragic stories of the most perfect kind, a foreboding and anxious gloom in the mind of him who hears it, is yet a truly dramatic and noble one; but the forms of Greek tra-

gedy, which are founded on Greek manners, on the practice of chorus-dancing, and on the ancient habitual transaction of affairs in the open air in front of the dwellings of kings, are better adapted to Greek stories than to Hebrew or any other. These reserves being made, it is impossible to praise the *Samson Agonistes* too highly: it is great with all the greatness of Milton. Goethe might well say to Eckermann, after re-reading it, that hardly any work had been composed so entirely in the spirit of the ancients.

Milton's drama has the true oratorical flow of ancient tragedy, produced mainly, I think, by his making it, as the Greeks made it, the rule, not the exception, to put the pause at the end of the line, not in the middle. Shakspeare has some noble passages, particularly in his *Richard the Third*, constructed with this, the true oratorical rhythm; indeed, that wonderful poet, who has so much besides rhetoric, is also the greatest poetical rhetorician since Euripides: still, it is to the Elizabethan poets that we owe the bad habit, in dramatic poetry, of perpetually dividing the line in the middle. Italian tragedy has the same habit: in Alfieri's plays it is intolerable. The constant occurrence of such lines produces, not a sense of variety, but a sense of perpetual interruption.

Some of the measures used in the choric songs of my tragedy are ordinary measures of English verse: others are not so; but it must not be supposed

that these last are the reproduction of any Greek choric measures. So to adapt Greek measures to English verse is impossible: what I have done is to try to follow rhythms which produced on my own feeling a similar impression to that produced on it by the rhythms of Greek choric poetry. In such an endeavour, when the ear is guided solely by its own feeling, there is, I know, a continual risk of failure and of offence. I believe, however, that there are no existing English measures which produce the same effect on the ear, and therefore on the mind, as that produced by many measures indispensable to the nature of Greek lyric poetry. He, therefore, who would obtain certain effects obtained by that poetry, is driven to invent new measures, whether he will or no.

Pope and Dryden felt this. Pope composed two choruses for the Duke of Buckingham's *Brutus*, a tragedy altered from Shakspeare, and performed at Buckingham-house. A short specimen will show what these choruses were—

> "Love's purer flames the Gods approve:
> The Gods and Brutus bend to love:
> Brutus for absent Portia sighs,
> And sterner Cassius melts at Junia's eyes."

In this style he proceeds for eight lines more, and then the antistrophe duly follows. Pope felt that the

peculiar effects of Greek lyric poetry were here missed; the measure in itself makes them impossible: in his ode on St. Cecilia's day, accordingly, he tries to come nearer to the Greeks. Here is a portion of his fourth stanza; of one of those stanzas in which Johnson thinks that "we have all that can be performed by sweetness of diction, or elegance of versification:"—

> "Dreadful gleams,
> Dismal screams,
> Fires that glow,
> Shrieks of woe,
> Sullen moans,
> Hollow groans,
> And cries of tortured ghosts."

Horrible! yet how dire must have been the necessity, how strong the feeling of the inadequacy of existing metres to produce effects demanded, which could drive a man of Pope's taste to such prodigies of invention! Dryden in his *Alexander's Feast* deviates less from ordinary English measures; but to deviate from them in some degree he was compelled. My admiration for Dryden's genius is warm: my delight in this incomparable ode, the mighty son of his old age, is unbounded: but it seems to me that in only one stanza and chorus of the *Alexander's Feast*, the fourth, does the rhythm from first to last completely satisfy the ear.

I must have wearied my reader's patience: but I was desirous, in laying before him my tragedy, that it should not lose what benefit it can derive from the foregoing explanations. To his favourable reception of it there will still be obstacles enough, in its unfamiliar form, and in the incapacity of its author.

How much do I regret that the many poets of the present day who possess that capacity which I have not, should not have forestalled me in an endeavour far beyond my powers! How gladly should I have applauded their better success in the attempt to enrich with what, in the forms of the most perfectly-formed literature in the world, is most perfect, our noble English literature; to extend its boundaries in the one direction, in which, with all its force and variety, it has not yet advanced! They would have lost nothing by such an attempt, and English literature would have gained much.

Only their silence could have emboldened to undertake it one with inadequate time, inadequate knowledge, and a talent, alas! still more inadequate: one who brings to the task none of the requisite qualifications of genius or learning: nothing but a passion for the great Masters, and an effort to study them without fancifulness.

London: December, 1857.

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION.

In the foregoing Preface * the story of Merope is detailed : what is here added may serve to explain allusions which occur in the course of the tragedy, and to illustrate the situation of its chief personages at the moment when it commences.

The events on which the action turns belong to the period of transition from the heroic and fabulous to the human and historic age of Greece. The hero Hercules, the ancestor of the Messenian Æpytus, belongs to fable: but the invasion of Peloponnesus by the Dorians under chiefs claiming to be descended from Hercules, and their settlement in Argos, Lacedæmon, and Messenia, belong to history. Æpytus is descended on the father's side from Hercules, Perseus, and the kings of Argos : on the mother's side from Pelasgus, and the aboriginal kings of Arcadia. Callisto, the daughter of the wicked Lycaon, and the mother, by Zeus, of Arcas, from whom the Arcadians took their name, was the grand-daughter of Pelasgus. The birth of Arcas brought upon Callisto the anger of the virgin-Goddess Artemis, whose service she followed : she was changed into a she-bear, and in this form was chased by her own son, grown to manhood. At the critical moment Zeus interposed, and the mother and son were removed from the earth, and placed among the stars : Callisto became the famous constellation of the Great Bear ; her son became Arcturus, Arctophylax, or Bootes. From him, Cypselus, the maternal grandfather of Æpytus, and the children of Cypselus, Laias and Merope, were lineally descended.

The events of the life of Hercules, the paternal ancestor of Æpytus, are so well known that it is hardly necessary to record them. It is sufficient to remind the reader, that, although entitled to the throne of Argos by right of descent from Perseus and Danaus, and to the thrones of Sparta and Messenia by right of con-

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quest, he yet passed his life in labours and wanderings, subjected by the decree of fate to the commands of his far inferior kinsman, the feeble and malignant Eurystheus. Hercules, who is represented with the violence as well as the virtues of an adventurous ever-warring hero, attacked and slew Eurytus, an Eubœan king, with whom he had a quarrel, and carried off the daughter of Eurytus, the beautiful Iole. The wife of Hercules, Deianeira, seized with jealous anxiety, remembered that long ago the centaur Nessus, dying by the poisoned arrows of Hercules, had assured her that the blood flowing from his mortal wound would prove an infallible love-charm to win back the affections of her husband, if she should ever lose them. With this philtre Deianeira now anointed a robe of triumph, which she sent to her victorious husband: he received it when about to offer public sacrifice, and immediately put it on: but the sun's rays called into activity the poisoned blood with which the robe was smeared: it clung to the flesh of the hero and consumed it. In dreadful agonies Hercules caused himself to be transported from Eubœa to Mount Œta: there, under the crags of Trachis, an immense funeral pile was constructed. Recognising the divine will in the fate which had overtaken him, the hero ascended the pile, and called on his children and followers to set it on fire. They refused; but the office was performed by Pœas, the father of Philoctetes, who, passing near, was attracted by the concourse round the pile, and who received the bow and arrows of Hercules for his reward. The flames arose, and the apotheosis of Hercules was consummated.

He bequeathed to his offspring, the Heracleidæ, his own claims to the kingdoms of Peloponnesus, and to the persecution of Eurystheus. They at first sought shelter with Ceyx, king of Trachis: he was too weak to protect them; and they then took refuge at Athens. The Athenians refused to deliver them up at the demand of Eurystheus: he invaded Attica, and a battle was fought near Marathon, in which, after Macaria, a daughter of Hercules, had devoted herself for the preservation of her house, Eurystheus fell, and the Heracleidæ and their Athenian protectors were victorious. The memory of Macaria's self-sacrifice was perpetuated by the name of a spring of water on the plain of Marathon, the spring Macaria. The Heracleidæ then endeavoured to effect their return to Peloponnesus. Hyllus, the eldest of them, inquired of the oracle at Delphi respecting their

return ; he was told to return by the *narrow passage*, and in the *third harvest*. Accordingly, in the third year from that time, Hyllus led an army to the Isthmus of Corinth ; but there he was encountered by an army of Achaians and Arcadians, and fell in single combat with Echemus, king of Tegea. Upon this defeat the Heracleidæ retired to Northern Greece ; there, after much wandering, they finally took refuge with Ægimius, king of the Dorians, who appears to have been the fastest friend of their house, and whose Dorian warriors formed the army which at last achieved their return. But, for a hundred years from the date of their first attempt, the Heracleidæ were defeated in their successive invasions of Peloponnesus. Cleolaus and Aristomachus, the son and grandson of Hyllus, fell in unsuccessful expeditions. At length the sons of Aristomachus, Temenus, Cresphontes, and Aristodemus, when grown up, repaired to Delphi and taxed the oracle with the non-fulfilment of the promise made to their ancestor Hyllus. But Apollo replied that his oracle had been misunderstood ; for that by the *third harvest* he had meant the third generation, and by the *narrow passage* he had meant the straits of the Corinthian Gulf. After this explanation the sons of Aristomachus built a fleet at Naupactus ; and finally, in the hundredth year from the death of Hyllus, and the eightieth from the fall of Troy, the invasion was again attempted, and was this time successful. The son of Orestes, Tisamenus, who ruled both Argos and Lacedæmon, fell in battle ; many of his vanquished subjects left their homes and retired to Achaia.

The spoil was now to be divided among the conquerors. Aristodemus, the youngest of the sons of Aristomachus, did not survive to enjoy his share. He was slain at Delphi by the sons of Pylades and Electra, the kinsmen of the house of Agamemnon, that house which the Heracleidæ with their Dorian army dispossessed. The claims of Aristodemus descended to his two sons, Procles and Eurysthenes, children under the guardianship of their maternal uncle, Theras. Temenus, the eldest of the sons of Aristomachus, took the kingdom of Argos ; for the two remaining kingdoms, that of Sparta and that of Messenia, his two nephews, who were to rule jointly, and their uncle Cresphontes, were to cast lots. Cresphontes wished to have the fertile Messenia, and induced his brother to acquiesce in a trick which secured it to him. The lot of Cresphontes and that of his two

nephews were to be placed in a water-jar, and thrown out. Messenia was to belong to him whose lot came out first. With the connivance of Temenus, Cresphontes marked as his own lot a pellet composed of baked clay ; as the lot of his nephews, a pellet of unbaked clay : the unbaked pellet was of course dissolved in the water, while the brick pellet fell out alone. Messenia, therefore, was assigned to Cresphontes.

Messenia was at this time ruled by Melanthus, a descendant of Neleus. This ancestor, a prince of the great house of Æolus, had come from Thessaly, and succeeded to the Messenian throne on the failure of the previous dynasty. Melanthus and his race were thus foreigners in Messenia, and were unpopular. His subjects offered little or no opposition to the invading Dorians : Melanthus abandoned his kingdom to Cresphontes, and retired to Athens.

Cresphontes married Merope, whose native country, Arcadia, was not affected by the Dorian invasion. This marriage, the issue of which was three sons, connected him with the native population of Peloponnesus. He built a new capital of Messenia, Stenyclaros, and transferred thither, from Pylos, the seat of government : he at first proposed, it is said by Pausanias, to divide Messenia into five states, and to confer on the native Messenians equal privileges with their Dorian conquerors. The Dorians complained that his administration unduly favoured the vanquished people : his chief magnates, headed by Polyphontes, himself a descendant of Hercules, formed a cabal against him, in which he was slain with his two eldest sons. The youngest son of Cresphontes, Æpytus, then an infant, was saved by his mother, who sent him to her father, Cypselus, the king of Arcadia, under whose protection he was brought up.

The drama begins at the moment when Æpytus, grown to manhood, returns secretly to Messenia to take vengeance on his father's murderers. At this period Temenus was no longer reigning at Argos : he had been murdered by his sons, jealous of their brother-in-law, Deiphontes : the sons of Aristodemus, Procles and Eurysthenes, at variance with their guardian, were reigning at Sparta.

MEROPE.

A TRAGEDY.

PERSONS OF THE DRAMA.

LAIAS, *uncle of* ÆPYTUS, *brother of* MEROPE.
ÆPYTUS, *son of* MEROPE *and* CRESPHONTES.
POLYPHONTES, *king of* MESSENIA.
MEROPE, *widow of* CRESPHONTES, *the murdered king of* MESSENIA.
THE CHORUS, *of* MESSENIAN *maidens*.
ARCAS, *an old man of* MEROPE'S *household*.
MESSENGER.
GUARDS, ATTENDANTS, &c.

The Scene is before the royal palace in STENYCLAROS, *the capital of* MESSENIA. *In the foreground is the tomb of* CRESPHONTES. *The action commences at day-break.*

MEROPE.

LAIAS. ÆPYTUS.

LAIAS.

Son of Cresphontes, we have reach'd the goal
Of our night-journey, and thou see'st thy home.
Behold thy heritage, thy father's realm!
This is that fruitful, fam'd Messenian land,
Wealthy in corn and flocks, which, when at last
The late-relenting Gods with victory brought
The Heracleidæ back to Pelops' isle,
Fell to thy father's lot, the second prize.
Before thy feet this recent city spreads

Of Stenyclaros, which he built, and made
Of his fresh-conquer'd realm the royal seat,
Degrading Pylos from its ancient rule.
There stands the temple of thine ancestor,
Great Hercules; and, in that public place,
Zeus hath his altar, where thy father fell.
Thence to the south, behold those snowy peaks,
Taygetus, Laconia's border-wall:
And, on this side, those confluent streams which make
Pamisus watering the Messenian plain:
Then to the north, Lycæus and the hills
Of pastoral Arcadia, where, a babe
Snatch'd from the slaughter of thy father's house,
Thy mother's kin receiv'd thee, and rear'd up. —
Our journey is well made, the work remains
Which to perform we made it; means for that
Let us consult, before this palace sends
Its inmates on their daily tasks abroad.
Haste and advise, for day comes on apace.

ÆPYTUS.

O brother of my mother, guardian true,
And second father from that hour when first
My mother's faithful servant laid me down,
An infant, at the hearth of Cypselus,
My grandfather, the good Arcadian king —
Thy part it were to advise, and mine to obey.
But let us keep that purpose, which, at home,
We judg'd the best; chance finds no better way.
Go thou into the city, and seek out
Whate'er in the Messenian city stirs
Of faithful fondness towards their former king
Or hatred to their present; in this last
Will lie, my grandsire said, our fairest chance.
For tyrants make man good beyond himself;
Hate to their rule, which else would die away,
Their daily-practis'd chafings keep alive.
Seek this; revive, unite it, give it hope;
Bid it rise boldly at the signal given.
Meanwhile within my father's palace I,

An unknown guest, will enter, bringing word
Of my own death; but, Laias, well I hope
Through that pretended death to live and reign.

[THE CHORUS *comes forth.*

Softly, stand back!—see, tow'rd the palace gates
What black procession slowly makes approach?—
Sad-chanting maidens clad in mourning robes,
With pitchers in their hands, and fresh-pull'd flowers:
Doubtless, they bear them to my father's tomb.—

[MEROPE *comes forth.*

And see, to meet them, that one, grief-plung'd Form,
Severer, paler, statelier than they all,
A golden circlet on her queenly brow.—
O Laias, Laias, let the heart speak here!
Shall I not greet her? shall I not leap forth?

[POLYPHONTES *comes forth, following* MEROPE.

LAIAS.

Not so: thy heart would pay its moment's speech
By silence ever after; for, behold!
The King (I know him, even through many years)

Follows the issuing Queen, who stops, as call'd.
No lingering now! straight to the city I:
Do thou, till for thine entrance to this house
The happy moment comes, lurk here unseen
Behind the shelter of thy father's tomb:
Remove yet further off, if aught comes near.
But, here while harbouring, on its margin lay,
Sole offering that thou hast, locks from thy head:
And fill thy leisure with an earnest prayer
To his avenging Shade, and to the Gods
Who under earth watch guilty deeds of men,
To guide our effort to a prosperous close.

[LAIAS *goes out.* POLYPHONTES, MEROPE, *and* THE CHORUS *come forward. As they advance,* ÆPYTUS, *who at first conceals himself behind the tomb, moves off the stage.*

POLYPHONTES. (*To* THE CHORUS.)

Set down your pitchers, maidens! and fall back;
Suspend your melancholy rites awhile:
Shortly ye shall resume them with your Queen. —

(*To* MEROPE.)

I sought thee, Merope; I find thee thus,
As I have ever found thee; bent to keep,
By sad observances and public grief,
A mournful feud alive, which else would die.
I blame thee not, I do thy heart no wrong:
Thy deep seclusion, thine unyielding gloom,
Thine attitude of cold, estrang'd reproach,
These punctual funeral honours, year by year
Repeated, are in thee, I well believe,
Courageous, faithful actions, nobly dar'd.
But, Merope, the eyes of other men
Read in these actions, innocent in thee,
Perpetual promptings to rebellious hope,
War-cries to faction, year by year renew'd,
Beacons of vengeance, not to be let die.
And me, believe it, wise men gravely blame,
And ignorant men despise me, that I stand
Passive, permitting thee what course thou wilt.
Yes, the crowd mutters that remorseful fear

And paralysing conscience stop my arm,
When it should pluck thee from thy hostile way.
All this I bear, for, what I seek, I know;
Peace, peace is what I seek, and public calm:
Endless extinction of unhappy hates:
Union cemented for this nation's weal.
And even now, if to behold me here,
This day, amid these rites, this black-rob'd train,
Wakens, O Queen! remembrance in thy heart
Too wide at variance with the peace I seek—
I will not violate thy noble grief,
The prayer I came to urge I will defer.

MEROPE.

This day, to-morrow, yesterday, alike
I am, I shall be, have been, in my mind
Tow'rds thee; towards thy silence as thy speech.
Speak, therefore, or keep silence, which thou wilt.

POLYPHONTES.

Hear me, then, speak; and let this mournful day,
The twentieth anniversary of strife,
Henceforth be honour'd as the date of peace.
Yes, twenty years ago this day beheld
The king Cresphontes, thy great husband, fall:
It needs no yearly offerings at his tomb
To keep alive that memory in my heart;
It lives, and, while I see the light, will live.
For we were kinsmen — more than kinsmen—friends:
Together we had sprung, together liv'd;
Together to this isle of Pelops came
To take the inheritance of Hercules;
Together won this fair Messenian land—
Alas, that, how to rule it, was our broil!
He had his counsel, party, friends —I mine;
He stood by what he wish'd for—I the same;
I smote him, when our wishes clash'd in arms;
He had smit me, had he been swift as I.
But while I smote him, Queen, I honour'd him;

Me, too, had he prevail'd, he had not scorn'd.
Enough of this!—since then, I have maintain'd
The sceptre—not remissly let it fall—
And I am seated on a prosperous throne:
Yet still, for I conceal it not, ferments
In the Messenian people what remains
Of thy dead husband's faction; vigorous once,
Now crush'd but not quite lifeless by his fall.
And these men look to thee, and from thy grief—
Something too studiously, forgive me, shown—
Infer thee their accomplice; and they say
That thou in secret nurturest up thy son,
Him whom thou hiddest when thy husband fell,
To avenge that fall, and bring them back to power.
Such are their hopes—I ask not if by thee
Willingly fed or no—their most vain hopes;
For I have kept conspiracy fast-chain'd
Till now, and I have strength to chain it still.
But, Merope, the years advance;—I stand
Upon the threshold of old age, alone,

Always in arms, always in face of foes.
The long repressive attitude of rule
Leaves me austerer, sterner, than I would;
Old age is more suspicious than the free
And valiant heart of youth, or manhood's firm,
Unclouded reason; I would not decline
Into a jealous tyrant, scourg'd with fears,
Closing, in blood and gloom, his sullen reign.
The cares which might in me with time, I feel,
Beget a cruel temper, help me quell
The breach between our parties help me close;
Assist me to rule mildly: let us join
Our hands in solemn union, making friends
Our factions with the friendship of their chiefs.
Let us in marriage, King and Queen, unite
Claims ever hostile else; and set thy son—
No more an exile fed on empty hopes,
And to an unsubstantial title heir,
But prince adopted by the will of power,
And future king—before this people's eyes.

Consider him; consider not old hates:
Consider, too, this people, who were dear
To their dead king, thy husband — yea, too dear,
For that destroy'd him. Give them peace; thou can'st.
O Merope, how many noble thoughts,
How many precious feelings of man's heart,
How many loves, how many gratitudes,
Do twenty years wear out, and see expire!
Shall they not wear one hatred out as well?

MEROPE.

Thou hast forgot, then, who I am who hear,
And who thou art who speakest to me? I
Am Merope, thy murder'd master's wife . . .
And thou art Polyphontes, first his friend,
And then . . . his murderer. These offending tears
That murder draws . . . this breach that thou would'st close
Was by that murder open'd . . . that one child

(If still, indeed, he lives) whom thou would'st seat
Upon a throne not thine to give, is heir
Because thou slew'st his brothers with their father. . . .
Who can patch union here? . . . What can there be
But everlasting horror 'twixt us two,
Gulfs of estranging blood? . . . Across that chasm
Who can extend their hands? . . . Maidens, take back
These offerings home! our rites are spoil'd to-day.

POLYPHONTES.

Not so: let these Messenian maidens mark
The fear'd and blacken'd ruler of their race,
Albeit with lips unapt to self-excuse,
Blow off the spot of murder from his name.—
Murder!—but what *is* murder? When a wretch
For private gain or hatred takes a life,
We call it murder, crush him, brand his name:
But when, for some great public cause, an arm
Is, without love or hate, austerely rais'd
Against a Power exempt from common checks,

Dangerous to all, to be but thus annull'd—
Ranks any man with murder such an act?
With grievous deeds, perhaps; with murder — no!
Find then such cause, the charge of murder falls:
Be judge thyself if it abound not here.—
All know how weak the Eagle, Hercules,
Soaring from his death-pile on Œta, left
His puny, callow Eaglets; and what trials—
Infirm protectors, dubious oracles
Construed awry, misplann'd invasions—us'd
Two generations of his offspring up;
Hardly the third, with grievous loss, regain'd
Their fathers' realm, this isle, from Pelops nam'd.—
Who made that triumph, though deferr'd, secure?
Who, but the kinsmen of the royal brood
Of Hercules, scarce Heracleidæ less
Than they? these, and the Dorian lords, whose king
Ægimius gave our outcast house a home
When Thebes, when Athens dar'd not; who in arms
Thrice issued with us from their pastoral vales,

And shed their blood like water in our cause?—
Such were the dispossessors: of what stamp
Were they we dispossessed?—of us I speak,
Who to Messenia with thy husband came—
I speak not now of Argos, where his brother,
Not now of Sparta, where his nephews reign'd:—
What we found here were tribes of fame obscure,
Much turbulence, and little constancy,
Precariously rul'd by foreign lords
From the Æolian stock of Neleus sprung,
A house once great, now dwindling in its sons.
Such were the conquer'd, such the conquerors: who
Had most thy husband's confidence? Consult
His acts; the wife he chose was—full of virtues—
But an Arcadian princess, more akin
To his new subjects than to us; his friends
Were the Messenian chiefs; the laws he fram'd
Were aim'd at their promotion, our decline;
And, finally, this land, then half-subdued,
Which from one central city's guarded seat

As from a fastness in the rocks our scant
Handful of Dorian conquerors might have curb'd,
He parcell'd out in five confederate states,
Sowing his victors thinly through them all,
Mere prisoners, meant or not, among our foes.
If this was fear of them, it sham'd the king:
If jealousy of us, it sham'd the man.—
Long we refrain'd ourselves, submitted long,
Construed his acts indulgently, rever'd,
Though found perverse, the blood of Hercules:
Reluctantly the rest; but, against all,
One voice preach'd patience, and that voice was mine.
At last it reach'd us, that he, still mistrustful,
Deeming, as tyrants deem, our silence hate,
Unadulating grief conspiracy,
Had to this city, Stenyclaros, call'd
A general assemblage of the realm,
With compact in that concourse to deliver,
For death, his ancient to his new-made friends.
Patience was thenceforth self-destruction. I,

I his chief kinsman, I his pioneer
And champion to the throne, I honouring most
Of men the line of Hercules, preferr'd
The many of that lineage to the one:
What his foes dar'd not, I, his lover, dar'd:
I, at that altar, where mid shouting crowds
He sacrific'd, our ruin in his heart,
To Zeus, before he struck his blow, struck mine:
Struck once, and aw'd his mob, and sav'd this realm.
Murder let others call this, if they will;
I, self-defence and righteous execution.

MEROPE.

Alas, how fair a colour can his tongue,
Who self-exculpates, lend to foulest deeds.
Thy trusting lord didst thou, his servant, slay;
Kinsman, thou slew'st thy kinsman; friend, thy friend:
This were enough; but let me tell thee, too,
Thou hadst no cause, as feign'd, in his misrule.
For ask at Argos, ask in Lacedæmon,

Whose people, when the Heracleidæ came,
Were hunted out, and to Achaia fled,
Whether is better, to abide alone,
A wolfish band, in a dispeopled realm,
Or conquerors with conquer'd to unite
Into one puissant folk, as he design'd?
These sturdy and unworn Messenian tribes,
Who shook the fierce Neleidæ on their throne,
Who to the invading Dorians stretch'd a hand,
And half bestow'd, half yielded up their soil—
He would not let his savage chiefs alight,
A cloud of vultures, on this vigorous race;
Ravin a little while in spoil and blood,
Then, gorg'd and helpless, be assail'd and slain.
He would have sav'd you from your furious selves,
Not in abhorr'd estrangement let you stand;
He would have mix'd you with your friendly foes,
Foes dazzled with your prowess, well inclin'd
To reverence your lineage, more, to obey:
So would have built you, in a few short years,

A just, therefore a safe, supremacy.
For well he knew, what you, his chiefs, did not—
How of all human rules the over-tense
Are apt to snap; the easy-stretch'd endure.—
O gentle wisdom, little understood!
O arts, above the vulgar tyrant's reach!
O policy too subtle far for sense
Of heady, masterful, injurious men!
This good he meant you, and for this he died.
Yet not for this—else might thy crime in part
Be error deem'd—but that pretence is vain.
For, if ye slew him for suppos'd misrule,
Injustice to his kin and Dorian friends,
Why with the offending father did ye slay
Two unoffending babes, his innocent sons?
Why not on them have plac'd the forfeit crown,
Rul'd in their name, and train'd them to your will?
Had *they* misrul'd? had *they* forgot their friends?
Forsworn their blood? ungratefully had *they*
Preferr'd Messenian serfs to Dorian lords?

No: but to thy ambition their poor lives
Were bar; and this, too, was their father's crime.
That thou might'st reign he died, not for his fault
Even fancied; and his death thou wroughtest chief.
For, if the other lords desir'd his fall
Hotlier than thou, and were by thee kept back,
Why dost thou only profit by his death?
Thy crown condemns thee, while thy tongue absolves.
And now to me thou tenderest friendly league,
And to my son reversion to thy throne:
Short answer is sufficient; league with thee,
For me I deem such impious; and for him,
Exile abroad more safe than heirship here.

POLYPHONTES.

I ask thee not to approve thy husband's death,
No, nor expect thee to admit the grounds,
In reason good, which justified my deed:
With women the heart argues, not the mind.
But, for thy children's death, I stand assoil'd:

I sav'd them, meant them honour : but thy friends
Rose, and with fire and sword assailed my house
By night ; in that blind tumult they were slain.
To chance impute their deaths, then, not to me.

MEROPE.

Such chance as kill'd the father, kill'd the sons.

POLYPHONTES.

One son at least I spar'd, for still he lives.

MEROPE.

Tyrants think him they murder not they spare.

POLYPHONTES.

Not much a tyrant thy free speech displays me.

MEROPE.

Thy shame secures my freedom, not thy will.

POLYPHONTES.

Shame rarely checks the genuine tyrant's will.

MEROPE.

One merit, then, thou hast: exult in that.

POLYPHONTES.

Thou standest out, I see, repellest peace.

MEROPE.

Thy sword repell'd it long ago, not I.

POLYPHONTES.

Doubtless thou reckonest on the hope of friends.

MEROPE.

Not help of men, although, perhaps, of Gods.

POLYPHONTES.

What Gods? the Gods of concord, civil weal?

MEROPE.

No : the avenging Gods, who punish crime.

POLYPHONTES.

Beware ! from thee upbraidings I receive
With pity, nay, with reverence ; yet, beware !
I know, I know how hard it is to think
That right, that conscience pointed to a deed,
Where interest seems to have enjoin'd it too.
Most men are led by interest ; and the few
Who are not, expiate the general sin,
Involv'd in one suspicion with the base.
Dizzy the path and perilous the way
Which in a deed like mine a just man treads,
But it is sometimes trodden, oh ! believe it.
Yet how *canst* thou believe it ? therefore thou
Hast all impunity. Yet, lest thy friends,
Embolden'd by my lenience, think it fear,
And count on like impunity, and rise,
And have to thank thee for a fall, beware !

To rule this kingdom I intend: with sway
Clement, if may be, but to rule it: there
Expect no wavering, no retreat, no change.—
And now I leave thee to these rites, esteem'd
Pious, but impious, surely, if their scope
Be to foment old memories of wrath.
Pray, as thou pour'st libations on this tomb,
To be delivered from thy foster'd hate,
Unjust suspicion, and erroneous fear.

[POLYPHONTES *goes into the palace.* THE CHORUS *and* MEROPE *approach the tomb with their offerings.*

THE CHORUS.

Draw, draw near to the tomb. *strophe.*
Lay honey-cakes on its marge,
Pour the libation of milk,
Deck it with garlands of flowers.
Tears fall thickly the while!
Behold, O King, from the dark
House of the grave, what we do.

O Arcadian hills, *antistrophe.*
Send us the Youth whom ye hide,
Girt with his coat for the chase,
With the low broad hat of the tann'd
Hunter o'ershadowing his brow :
Grasping firm, in his hand
Advanc'd, two javelins, not now
Dangerous alone to the deer.

MEROPE.

What shall I bear, O lost *str.* 1.
Husband and King, to thy grave ?—
Pure libations, and fresh
Flowers ? But thou, in the gloom,
Discontented, perhaps,
Demandest vengeance, not grief ?
Sternly requirest a man,
Light to spring up to thy race ?

THE CHORUS.

Vengeance, O Queen, is his due, *str.* 2.
His most just prayer : yet his race —
If that might soothe him below —
Prosperous, mighty, came back
In the third generation, the way
Order'd by Fate, to their home.
And now, glorious, secure,
Fill the wealth-giving thrones
Of their heritage, Pelops' isle.

MEROPE.

Suffering sent them, Death *ant.* 1.
March'd with them, Hatred and Strife
Met them entering their halls.
For from the day when the first
Heracleidæ receiv'd
That Delphic hest to return,
What hath involv'd them but blind
Error on error, and blood ?

THE CHORUS.

Truly I hear of a Maid *ant.* 2.
Of that stock born, who bestow'd
Her blood that so she might make
Victory sure to her race,
When the fight hung in doubt: but she now,
Honour'd and sung of by all,
Far on Marathon plain
Gives her name to the spring
Macaria, blessed Child.

MEROPE.

She led the way of death. *str.* 3
And the plain of Tegea,
And the grave of Orestes —
Where, in secret seclusion
Of his unreveal'd tomb,
Sleeps Agamemnon's unhappy,
Matricidal, world-fam'd,
Seven-cubit-statur'd son —

Sent forth Echemus, the victor, the king,
By whose hand, at the Isthmus,
At the Fate-denied Straits,
Fell the eldest of the sons of Hercules
Hyllus, the chief of his house.—
Brother follow'd sister
The all-wept way.

THE CHORUS.

Yes ; but his son's seed, wiser-counsell'd,
Sail'd by the Fate-meant Gulf to their conquest ;
Slew their enemies' king, Tisamenus.
Wherefore accept that happier omen !
Yet shall restorers appear to the race.

MEROPE.

Three brothers won the field, *ant.* 3.
And to two did Destiny
Give the thrones that they conquer'd.
But the third, what delays him

From his unattain'd crown? . . .
Ah Pylades and Electra,
Ever faithful, untir'd,
Jealous, blood-exacting friends!
Ye lie watching for the foe of your kin,
In the passes of Delphi,
In the temple-built gorge.—
There the youngest of the band of conquerors
Perish'd, in sight of the goal.
Grandson follow'd sire
The all-wept way.

THE CHORUS.

Thou tellest the fate of the last *str.* 4.
Of the three Heracleidæ.
Not of him, of Cresphontes thou shared'st the lot.
A king, a king was he while he liv'd,
Swaying the sceptre with predestin'd hand.
And now, minister lov'd,
Holds rule ——

MEROPE.

Ah me . . . Ah . . .

THE CHORUS.

For the awful Monarchs below.

MEROPE.

Thou touchest the worst of my ills. *str.* 5.
Oh had he fallen of old
At the Isthmus, in fight with his foes,
By Achaian, Arcadian spear!
Then had his sepulchre risen
On the high sea-bank, in the sight
Of either Gulf, and remain'd
All-regarded afar,
Noble memorial of worth
Of a valiant Chief, to his own.

THE CHORUS.

There rose up a cry in the streets *ant* 4.
From the terrified people.

From the altar of Zeus, from the crowd, came a wail.
A blow, a blow was struck, and he fell,
Sullying his garment with dark-streaming blood:
While stood o'er him a Form —
Some Form ——

MEROPE.

Ah me . . .Ah . . .

THE CHORUS.

Of a dreadful Presence of fear.

MEROPE.

More piercing the second cry rang, *ant.* 5.
Wail'd from the palace within,
From the Children. . . . The Fury to them,
Fresh from their father, draws near.
Ah bloody axe! dizzy blows!
In these ears, they thunder, they ring,
These poor ears, still:—and these eyes
Night and day see them fall,

Fiery phantoms of death,
On the fair, curl'd heads of my sons.

THE CHORUS.

Not to thee only hath come *str.* 6.
Sorrow, O Queen, of mankind.
Had not Electra to haunt
A palace defil'd by a death unaveng'd,
For years, in silence, devouring her heart?
But her nursling, her hope, came at last.
Thou, too, rearest in joy,
Far 'mid Arcadian hills,
Somewhere, in safety, a nursling, a light.
Yet, yet shall Zeus bring him home!
Yet shall he dawn on this land!

MEROPE.

Him in secret, in tears, *str.* 7.
Month after month, through the slow-dragging year,
Longing, listening, I wait, I implore.
But he comes not. What dell,

O Erymanthus! from sight
Of his mother, which of thy glades,
O Lycæus! conceals
The happy hunter? He basks
In youth's pure morning, nor thinks
On the blood-stain'd home of his birth.

THE CHORUS.

Give not thy heart to despair. *ant.* 6.
No lamentation can loose
Prisoners of death from the grave:
But Zeus, who accounteth thy quarrel his own,
Still rules, still watches, and numbers the hours
Till the sinner, the vengeance, be ripe.
Still, by Acheron stream,
Terrible Deities thron'd
Sit, and make ready the serpent, the scourge.
Still, still the Dorian boy,
Exil'd, remembers his home.

MEROPE.

Him if high-ruling Zeus *ant.* 7.

Bring to his mother, the rest I commit,
Willing, patient, to Zeus, to his care.
Blood I ask not. Enough
Sated, and more than enough,
Are mine eyes with blood. But if this,
O my comforters! strays
Amiss from Justice, the Gods
Forgive my folly, and work
What they will!—but to me give my son!

THE CHORUS.

Hear us and help us, Shade of our King! *str.* 8.

MEROPE.

A return, O Father! give to thy boy! *str.* 9.

THE CHORUS.

Send an avenger, Gods of the dead! *ant.* 8.

MEROPE.

An avenger I ask not: send me my son! *ant.* 9.

THE CHORUS.

O Queen, for an avenger to appear,
Thinking that so I pray'd aright, I pray'd:
If I pray'd wrongly, I revoke the prayer.

MEROPE.

Forgive me, maidens, if I seem too slack
In calling vengeance on a murderer's head.
Impious I deem the alliance which he asks;
Requite him words severe, for seeming kind;
And righteous, if he falls, I count his fall.
With this, to those unbrib'd inquisitors,
Who in man's inmost bosom sit and judge,
The true avengers these, I leave his deed,
By him shown fair, but, I believe, most foul.
If these condemn him, let them pass his doom!
That doom obtain effect, from Gods or men!
So be it! yet will that more solace bring
To the chaf'd heart of Justice than to mine.—
To hear another tumult in these streets,

To have another murder in these halls,
To see another mighty victim bleed —
There is small comfort for a woman here.
A woman, O my friends, has one desire —
To see secure, to live with, those she loves.
Can Vengeance give me back the murdered? no!
Can it bring home my child? Ah, if it can,
I pray the Furies' ever-restless band,
And pray the Gods, and pray the all-seeing Sun—
"Sun, who careerest through the height of Heaven,
When o'er the Arcadian forests thou art come,
And seest my stripling hunter there afield,
Put tightness in thy gold-embossed rein,
And check thy fiery steeds, and, leaning back,
Throw him a pealing word of summons down,
To come, a late avenger, to the aid
Of this poor soul who bore him, and his sire."
If this will bring him back, be this my prayer! —
But Vengeance travels in a dangerous way,

Double of issue, full of pits and snares
For all who pass, pursuers and pursued—
That way is dubious for a mother's prayer.
Rather on thee I call, Husband belov'd!—
May Hermes, herald of the dead, convey
My words below to thee, and make thee hear.—
Bring back our son! if may be, without blood!
Install him in thy throne, still without blood!
Grant him to reign there wise and just like thee,
More fortunate than thee, more fairly judg'd!
This for our son: and for myself I pray,
Soon, having once beheld him, to descend
Into the quiet gloom, where thou art now.
These words to thine indulgent ear, thy wife,
I send, and these libations pour the while.

[*They make their offerings at the tomb.* MEROPE *then goes towards the palace.*

THE CHORUS.

The dead hath now his offerings duly paid.
But whither go'st thou hence, O Queen, away?

MEROPE.

To receive Arcas, who to-day should come,
Bringing me of my boy the annual news.

THE CHORUS.

No certain news if like the rest it run.

MEROPE.

Certain in this, that 'tis uncertain still.

THE CHORUS.

What keeps him in Arcadia from return ?

MEROPE.

His grandsire and his uncles fear the risk.

THE CHORUS.

Of what ? it lies with them to make risk none.

MEROPE.

Discovery of a visit made by stealth.

THE CHORUS.

With arms then they should send him, not by stealth.

MEROPE.

With arms they dare not, and by stealth they fear.

THE CHORUS.

I doubt their caution little suits their ward.

MEROPE.

The heart of youth I know; that most I fear.

THE CHORUS.

I augur thou wilt hear some bold resolve.

MEROPE.

I dare not wish it; but, at least, to hear
That my son still survives, in health, in bloom;
To hear that still he loves, still longs for, me;
Yet, with a light uncareworn spirit, turns

Quick from distressful thought, and floats in joy—
Thus much from Arcas, my old servant true,
Who sav'd him from these murderous halls a babe,
And since has fondly watch'd him night and day
Save for this annual charge, I hope to hear.
If this be all, I know not; but I know,
These many years I live for this alone.

[MEROPE *goes in.*

THE CHORUS.

Much is there which the Sea *str.* 1.
Conceals from man, who cannot plumb its depths.
Air to his unwing'd form denies a way,
And keeps its liquid solitudes unscal'd.
Even Earth, whereon he treads,
So feeble is his march, so slow,
Holds countless tracts untrod.

But, more than all unplumb'd, *ant.* 1.
Unscal'd, untrodden, is the heart of Man.

More than all secrets hid, the way it keeps.
Nor any of our organs so obtuse,
Inaccurate, and frail,
As those with which we try to test
Feelings and motives there.

Yea, and not only have we not explor'd *str.* 2.
That wide and various world, the heart of others,
But even our own heart, that narrow world
Bounded in our own breast, we hardly know,
Of our own actions dimly trace the causes.
Whether a natural obscureness, hiding
That region in perpetual cloud,
Or our own want of effort, be the bar.

Therefore — while acts are from their motives judg'd, *ant.* 2.
And to one act many most unlike motives,
This pure, that guilty, may have each impell'd —
Power fails us to try clearly if that cause
Assign'd us by the actor be the true one:

Power fails the man himself to fix distinctly
The cause which drew him to his deed,
And stamp himself, thereafter, bad or good.

The most are bad, wise men have said. *str.* 3.
Let the best rule, they say again.
The best, then, to dominion have the right.
Rights unconceded and denied,
Surely, if rights, may be by force asserted —
May be, nay should, if for the general weal.
The best, then, to the throne may carve his way,
And hew opposers down,
Free from all guilt of lawlessness,
Or selfish lust of personal power:
Bent only to serve Virtue,
Bent to diminish wrong.

And truly, in this ill-rul'd world, *ant.* 3.
Well sometimes may the good desire
To give to Virtue her dominion due.

Well may they long to interrupt
The reign of Folly, usurpation ever,
Though fenc'd by sanction of a thousand years.
Well thirst to drag the wrongful ruler down.
Well purpose to pen back
Into the narrow path of right,
The ignorant, headlong multitude,
Who blindly follow ever
Blind leaders, to their bane.

But who can say, without a fear, *str.* 4.
That best, who ought to rule, am I;
The mob, who ought to obey, are these;
I the one righteous, they the many bad? —
Who, without check of conscience, can aver
That he to power makes way by arms,
Sheds blood, imprisons, banishes, attaints,
Commits all deeds the guilty oftenest do,
Without a single guilty thought,
Arm'd for right only, and the general good?

Therefore, with censure unallay'd, *ant.* 4.
Therefore, with unexcepting ban,
Zeus and pure-thoughted Justice brand
Imperious self-asserting Violence.
Sternly condemn the too bold man, who dares
Elect himself Heaven's destin'd arm.
And, knowing well man's inmost heart infirm,
However noble the committer be,
His grounds however specious shown,
Turn with averted eyes from deeds of blood.

Thus, though a woman, I was school'd *epode.*
By those whom I revere.
Whether I learnt their lessons well,
Or, having learnt them, well apply
To what hath in this house befall'n,
If in the event be any proof,
The event will quickly show.

[ÆPYTUS *comes in.*

ÆPYTUS.

Maidens, assure me if they told me true
Who told me that the royal house was here.

THE CHORUS.

Rightly they told thee, and thou art arriv'd.

ÆPYTUS.

Here, then, it is, where Polyphontes dwells?

THE CHORUS.

He doth: thou hast both house and master right.

ÆPYTUS.

Might some one straight inform him he is sought?

THE CHORUS.

Inform him that thyself, for here he comes.

[POLYPHONTES *comes forth, with* ATTENDANTS *and* GUARDS.

ÆPYTUS.

O King, all hail! I come with weighty news:
Most likely, grateful; but, in all case, sure.

POLYPHONTES.

Speak them, that I may judge their kind myself.

ÆPYTUS.

Accept them in one word, for good or bad:
Æpytus, the Messenian prince, is dead!

POLYPHONTES.

Dead!—and when died he? where? and by what hand?
And who art thou, who bringest me such news?

ÆPYTUS.

He perish'd in Arcadia, where he liv'd
With Cypselus; and two days since he died.
One of the train of Cypselus am I.

POLYPHONTES.

Instruct me of the manner of his death.

ÆPYTUS.

That will I do, and to this end I came.
For, being of like age, of birth not mean,
The son of an Arcadian noble, I
Was chosen his companion from a boy ;
And on the hunting-rambles which his heart,
Unquiet, drove him ever to pursue,
Through all the lordships of the Arcadian dales,
From chief to chief, I wander'd at his side,
The captain of his squires, and his guard.
On such a hunting-journey, three morns since,
With beaters, hounds, and huntsmen, he and I
Set forth from Tegea, the royal town.
The prince at start seem'd sad, but his regard
Clear'd with blithe travel and the morning air.
We rode from Tegea, through the woods of oaks,
Past Arnê spring, where Rhea gave the babe

Poseidon to the shepherd-boys to hide
From Saturn's search among the new-yean'd lambs,
To Mantinea, with its unbak'd walls ;
Thence, by the Sea-God's Sanctuary, and the tomb
Whither from wintry Mænalus were brought
The bones of Arcas, whence our race is nam'd,
On, to the marshy Orchomenian plain,
And the Stone Coffins ; — then, by Caphyæ Cliffs,
To Pheneos with its craggy citadel.
There, with the chief of that hill-town, we lodg'd
One night ; and the next day, at dawn, far'd on
By the Three Fountains and the Adder's Hill
To the Stymphalian Lake, our journey's end,
To draw the coverts on Cyllene's side.
There, on a grassy spur which bathes its root
Far in the liquid lake, we sate, and drew
Cates from our hunters' pouch, Arcadian fare,
Sweet chestnuts, barley-cakes, and boar's-flesh dried :
And as we ate, and rested there, we talk'd
Of places we had pass'd, sport we had had,

Of beasts of chase that haunt the Arcadian hills,
Wild hog, and bear, and mountain-deer, and roe :
Last, of our quarters with the Arcadian chiefs.
For courteous entertainment, welcome warm,
Sad, reverential homage, had our prince
From all, for his great lineage and his woes :
All which he own'd, and prais'd with grateful mind.
But still over his speech a gloom there hung,
As of one shadow'd by impending death ;
And strangely, as we talk'd, he would apply
The story of spots mention'd to his own :
Telling us, Arnê minded him, he too
Was sav'd a babe, but to a life obscure,
Which he, the seed of Hercules, dragg'd on
Inglorious, and should drop at last unknown,
Even as those dead unepitaph'd, who lie
In the stone coffins at Orchomenus.
And, then, he bade remember how we pass'd
The Mantinean Sanctuary, forbid
To foot of mortal, where his ancestor,

Nam'd Æpytus like him, having gone in,
Was blinded by the outgushing springs of brine.
Then, turning westward to the Adder's Hill —
Another ancestor, nam'd, too, like me,
Died of a snake-bite, said he, *on that brow :*
Still at his mountain tomb men marvel, built
Where, as life ebb'd, his bearers laid him down.
So he play'd on ; then ended, with a smile —
This region is not happy for my race.
We cheer'd him ; but, that moment, from the copse
By the lake-edge, broke the sharp cry of hounds ;
The prickers shouted that the stag was gone :
We sprang upon our feet, we snatch'd our spears,
We bounded down the swarded slope, we plung'd
Through the dense ilex-thickets to the dogs.
Far in the woods ahead their music rang ;
And many times that morn we cours'd in ring
The forests round which belt Cyllene's side ;
Till I, thrown out and tired, came to halt
On the same spur where we had sate at morn.

And resting there to breathe, I saw below
Rare, straggling hunters, foil'd by brake and crag,
And the prince, single, pressing on the rear
Of that unflagging quarry and the hounds.
Now, in the woods far down, I saw them cross
An open glade ; now he was high aloft
On some tall scar fring'd with dark feathery pines,
Peering to spy a goat-track down the cliff,
Cheering with hand, and voice, and horn his dogs.
At last the cry drew to the water's edge —
And through the brushwood, to the pebbly strand,
Broke, black with sweat, the antler'd mountain stag,
And took the lake : two hounds alone pursued ;
Then came the prince—he shouted and plung'd in.—
There is a chasm rifted in the base
Of that unfooted precipice, whose rock
Walls on one side the deep Stymphalian Lake :
There the lake-waters, which in ages gone
Wash'd, as the marks upon the hills still show,
All the Stymphalian plain, are now suck'd down.

A headland, with one aged plane-tree crown'd,
Parts from the cave-pierc'd cliff the shelving bay
Where first the chase plung'd in : the bay is smooth,
But round the headland's point a current sets,
Strong, black, tempestuous, to the cavern-mouth.
Stoutly, under the headland's lee, they swam :
But when they came abreast the point, the race
Caught them, as wind takes feathers, whirl'd them round
Struggling in vain to cross it, swept them on,
Stag, dogs, and hunter, to the yawning gulph.
All this, O King, not piecemeal, as to thee
Now told, but in one flashing instant pass'd :
While from the turf whereon I lay I sprang,
And took three strides, quarry and dogs were gone ;
A moment more — I saw the prince turn round
Once in the black and arrowy race, and cast
One arm aloft for help ; then sweep beneath
The low-brow'd cavern-arch, and disappear.
And what I could, I did — to call by cries

Some straggling hunters to my aid, to rouse
Fishers who live on the lake-side, to launch
Boats, and approach, near as we dar'd, the chasm.
But of the prince nothing remain'd, save this,
His boar-spear's broken shaft, back on the lake
Cast by the rumbling subterranean stream ;
And this, at landing spied by us and sav'd,
His broad-brimm'd hunter's hat, which, in the bay,
Where first the stag took water, floated still.
And I across the mountains brought with haste
To Cypselus, at Basilis, this news :
Basilis, his new city, which he now
Near Lycosura builds, Lycaon's town,
First city founded on the earth by men.
He to thee sends me on, in one thing glad
While all else grieves him, that his grandchild's death
Extinguishes distrust 'twixt him and thee.
But I from our deplor'd mischance learn this —
The man who to untimely death is doom'd,

Vainly you hedge him from the assault of harm ;
He bears the seed of ruin in himself.

THE CHORUS.

So dies the last shoot of our royal tree !
Who shall tell Merope this heavy news ?

POLYPHONTES.

Stranger, the news thou bringest is too great
For instant comment, having many sides
Of import, and in silence best receiv'd,
Whether it turn at last to joy or woe.
But thou, the zealous bearer, hast no part
In what it has of painful, whether now,
First heard, or in its future issue shown.
Thou for thy labour hast deserv'd our best
Refreshment, needed by thee, as I judge,
With mountain-travel and night-watching spent.—
To the guest-chamber lead him, some one ! give
All entertainment which a traveller needs,

And such as fits a royal house to show :
To friends, still more, and labourers in our cause.

[ATTENDANTS *conduct* ÆPYTUS *within the palace.*

THE CHORUS.

The youth is gone within ; alas ! he bears
A presence sad for some one through those doors.

POLYPHONTES.

Admire then, maidens, how in one short hour
The schemes, pursued in vain for twenty years,
Are by a stroke, though undesir'd, complete,
Crown'd with success, not in my way, but Heaven's !
This at a moment, too, when I had urg'd
A last, long-cherish'd project, in my aim
Of concord, and been baffled with disdain.
Fair terms of reconcilement, equal rule,
I offer'd to my foes, and they refus'd :
Worse terms than mine they have obtain'd from Heaven.

Dire is this blow for Merope ; and I
Wish'd, truly wish'd, solution to our broil
Other than by this death : but it hath come !
I speak no word of boast, but this I say,
A private loss here founds a nation's peace.

[POLYPHONTES *goes out.*

THE CHORUS.

Peace, who tarriest too long ; *str.* 5.
Peace, with Delight in thy train ;
Come, come back to our prayer !
Then shall the revel again
Visit our streets, and the sound
Of the harp be heard with the pipe,
When the flashing torches appear
In the marriage-train coming on,
With dancing maidens and boys :
While the matrons come to the doors,
And the old men rise from their bench,
When the youths bring home the bride.

Not decried by my voice *ant.*
He who restores thee shall be,
Not unfavour'd by Heaven.
Surely no sinner the man,
Dread though his acts, to whose hand
Such a boon to bring hath been given.
Let her come, fair Peace! let her come!
But the demons long nourish'd here,
Murder, Discord, and Hate,
In the stormy desolate waves
Of the Thracian Sea let her leave,
Or the howling outermost Main.

[MEROPE *comes forth.*

MEROPE.

A whisper through the palace flies of one
Arriv'd from Tegea with weighty news;
And I came, thinking to find Arcas here.
Ye have not left this gate, which he must pass:
Tell me—hath one not come? or, worse mischance,
Come, but been intercepted by the King?

THE CHORUS.

A messenger, sent from Arcadia here,
Arriv'd, and of the King had speech but now.

MEROPE.

Ah me ! the wrong expectant got his news.

THE CHORUS.

The message brought was for the King design'd.

MEROPE.

How so ? was Arcas not the messenger ?

THE CHORUS.

A younger man, and of a different name.

MEROPE.

And what Arcadian news had he to tell ?

THE CHORUS.

Learn that from other lips, O Queen, than mine.

MEROPE.

He kept his tale, then, for the King alone ?

THE CHORUS.

His tale was meeter for that ear than thine.

MEROPE.

Why dost thou falter, and make half reply ?

THE CHORUS.

O thrice unhappy, how I groan thy fate !

MEROPE.

Thou frightenest and confound'st me by thy words.
O were but Arcas come, all would be well !

THE CHORUS.

If so, all's well : for look, the old man speeds
Up from the city tow'rds this gated hill.

[ARCAS *comes in.*

MEROPE.

Not with the failing breath and foot of age
My faithful follower comes. Welcome, old friend !

ARCAS.

Faithful, not welcome, when my tale is told.
O that my over-speed and bursting grief
Had on the journey chok'd my labouring breath,
And lock'd my speech for ever in my breast !
Yet then another man would bring this news.—
O honour'd Queen, thy son, my charge, is gone.

THE CHORUS.

Too suddenly thou tellest such a loss.
Look up, O Queen ! look up, O mistress dear !
Look up, and see thy friends who comfort thee.

MEROPE.

Ah . . . Ah . . . Ah me !

THE CHORUS.

And I, too, say, ah me !

ARCAS.

Forgive, forgive the bringer of such news !

MEROPE.

Better from thine than from an enemy's tongue.

THE CHORUS.

And yet no enemy did this, O Queen:
But the wit-baffling will and hand of Heaven.

ARCAS.

No enemy ! and what hast thou, then, heard ?
Swift as I came, hath Falsehood been before ?

THE CHORUS.

A youth arriv'd but now, the son, he said,
Of an Arcadian lord, our prince's friend,

Jaded with travel, clad in hunter's garb..
He brought report that his own eyes had seen
The prince, in chase after a swimming stag,
Swept down a chasm broken in the cliff
Which hangs o'er the Stymphalian Lake, and drown'd.

ARCAS.

Ah me ! with what a foot doth Treason post,
While Loyalty, with all her speed, is slow !
Another tale, I trow, thy messenger
For the King's private ear reserves, like this
In one thing only, that the prince is dead.

THE CHORUS.

And how then runs this true and private tale ?

ARCAS.

As much to the King's wish, more to his shame.
This young Arcadian noble, guard and mate
To Æpytus, the king seduc'd with gold,

And had him at the prince's side in leash,
Ready to slip on his unconscious prey.
He on a hunting party three days since,
Among the forests on Cyllene's side,
Perform'd good service for his bloody wage ;
The prince, his uncle Laias, whom his ward
Had in a father's place, he basely murder'd.
Take this for true, the other tale for feign'd.

THE CHORUS.

And this perfidious murder who reveal'd ?

ARCAS.

The faithless murderer's own, no other tongue.

THE CHORUS.

Did conscience goad him to denounce himself ?

ARCAS.

To Cypselus at Basilis he brought
This strange unlikely tale, the prince was drown'd.

THE CHORUS.

But not a word appears of murder here.

ARCAS.

Examin'd close, he own'd this story false.
Then evidence came — his comrades of the hunt,
Who saw the prince and Laias last with him,
Never again in life — next, agents, fee'd
To ply 'twixt the Messenian king and him,
Spoke, and reveal'd that traffic, and the traitor.
So charg'd, he stood dumb-founder'd : Cypselus,
On this suspicion, cast him into chains.
Thence he escap'd — and next I find him here.

THE CHORUS.

His presence with the King, thou mean'st, implies ——

ARCAS.

He comes to tell his prompter he hath sped.

THE CHORUS.

Still he repeats the drowning story here.

ARCAS.

To thee — that needs no Œdipus to explain.

THE CHORUS.

Interpret, then ; for we, it seems, are dull.

ARCAS.

Your King desir'd the profit of his death,
Not the black credit of his murderer.
That stern word "*murder*" had too dread a sound
For the Messenian hearts, who lov'd the prince.

THE CHORUS.

Suspicion grave I see, but no clear proof.

MEROPE.

Peace ! peace ! all's clear. — The wicked watch and work
While the good sleep : the workers have the day.

He who was sent hath sped, and now comes back,
To chuckle with his sender o'er the game
Which foolish innocence plays with subtle guilt.
Ah ! now I comprehend the liberal grace
Of this far-scheming tyrant, and his boon
Of heirship to his kingdom for my son :
He had his murderer ready, and the sword
Lifted, and that unwish'd-for heirship void—
A tale, meanwhile, forg'd for his subjects' ears :
And me, henceforth sole rival with himself
In their allegiance, me, in my son's death-hour,
When all turn'd tow'rds me, me he would have shown
To my Messenians, dup'd, disarm'd, despis'd,
The willing sharer of his guilty rule,
All claim to succour forfeit, to myself
Hateful, by each Messenian heart abhorr'd.—
His offers I repelled — but what of that ?
If with no rage, no fire of righteous hate,
Such as ere now hath spurr'd to fearful deeds
Weak women with a thousandth part my wrongs,

But calm, but unresentful, I endur'd
His offers, coldly heard them, cold repell'd ?
While all this time I bear to linger on
In this blood-delug'd palace, in whose halls
Either a vengeful Fury I should stalk,
Or else not live at all — but here I haunt,
A pale, unmeaning ghost, powerless to fright
Or harm, and nurse my longing for my son,
A helpless one, I know it : — but the Gods
Have temper'd me e'en thus ; and, in some souls,
Misery, which rouses others, breaks the spring.
And even now, my son, ah me ! my son,
Fain would I fade away, as I have liv'd,
Without a cry, a struggle, or a blow,
All vengeance unattempted, and descend
To the invisible plains, to roam with thee,
Fit denizen, the lampless under-world ——
But with what eyes should I encounter there
My husband, wandering with his stern compeers,
Amphiaraos, or Mycenæ's king,

Who led the Greeks to Ilium, Agamemnon,
Betray'd like him, but, not like him, aveng'd ?
Or with what voice shall I the questions meet
Of my two elder sons, slain long ago,
Who sadly ask me, what, if not revenge,
Kept me, their mother, from their side so long ?
Or how reply to thee, my child, last-born,
Last-murder'd, who reproachfully wilt say —
Mother, I well believ'd thou lived'st on
In the detested palace of thy foe,
With patience on thy face, death in thy heart,
Counting, till I grew up, the laggard years,
That our joint hands might then together pay
To one unhappy house the debt we owe.
My death makes my debt void, and doubles thine —
But down thou fleest here, and leav'st our scourge
Triumphant, and condemnest all our race
To lie in gloom for ever unappeas'd.
What shall I have to answer to such words ? —
No, something must be dar'd ; and, great as erst

Our dastard patience, be our daring now !
Come, ye swift Furies, who to him ye haunt
Permit no peace till your behests are done ;
Come Hermes, who dost watch the unjustly kill'd,
And can'st teach simple ones to plot and feign ;
Come, lightning Passion, that with foot of fire
Advancest to the middle of a deed
Almost before 'tis plann'd ; come, glowing Hate ;
Come, baneful Mischief, from thy murky den
Under the dripping black Tartarean cliff
Which Styx's awful waters trickle down —
Inspire this coward heart, this flagging arm !
How say ye, maidens, do ye know these prayers ?
Are these words Merope's — is this voice mine ?
Old man, old man, thou had'st my boy in charge,
And he is lost, and thou hast that to atone.
Fly, find me on the instant where confer
The murderer and his impious setter-on :
And ye, keep faithful silence, friends, and mark
What one weak woman can achieve alone.

ARCAS.

O mistress, by the Gods, do nothing rash !

MEROPE.

Unfaithful servant, dost thou, too, desert me ?

ARCAS.

I go ! I go ! — yet, Queen, take this one word :
Attempting deeds beyond thy power to do,
Thou nothing profitest thy friends, but mak'st
Our misery more, and thine own ruin sure.

[ARCAS *goes out.*

THE CHORUS.

I have heard, O Queen, how a prince, *str.* 1.
Agamemnon's son, in Mycenæ,
Orestes, died but in name,
Liv'd for the death of his foes.

MEROPE.

Peace !

THE CHORUS.

What is it ?

MEROPE.

Alas,

Thou destroyest me !

THE CHORUS.

How ?

MEROPE.

Whispering hope of a life
Which no stranger unknown,
But the faithful servant and guard,
Whose tears warrant his truth,
Bears sad witness is lost.

THE CHORUS.

Wheresoe'er men are, there is grief. *ant.* 1.

In a thousand countries, a thousand
Homes, e'en now is there wail ;
Mothers lamenting their sons.

MEROPE.

Yes ——

THE CHORUS.

Thou knowest it ?

MEROPE.

This,
Who lives, witnesses.

THE CHORUS.

True.

MEROPE.

But, is it only a fate
Sure, all-common, to lose

In a land of friends, by a friend,
One last, murder-sav'd child ?

THE CHORUS.

Ah me ! *str.* 2.

MEROPE.

Thou confessest the prize
In the rushing, thundering, mad,
Cloud-envelop'd, obscure,
Unapplauded, unsung
Race of calamity, mine ?

THE CHORUS.

None can truly claim that
Mournful preeminence, not
Thou.

MEROPE.

Fate *gives* it, ah me !

THE CHORUS.

Not, above all, in the doubts,
Double and clashing, that hang——

MEROPE.

What then ? *ant.* 2.
Seems it lighter, my loss,
If, perhaps, unpierc'd by the sword,
My child lies in a jagg'd
Sunless prison of rocks,
On the black wave borne to and fro ?

THE CHORUS.

Worse, far worse, if his friend,
If the Arcadian within,
If——

MEROPE (*with a start*).

How say'st thou ? within ? . . .

THE CHORUS.

He in the guest-chamber now,
Faithlessly murder'd his friend.

MEROPE.

Ye, too, ye, too, join to betray, then,
Your Queen!

THE CHORUS.

What is this?

MEROPE.

Ye knew,
O false friends! into what
Haven the murderer had dropp'd?
Ye kept silence?

THE CHORUS.

In fear,

O lov'd mistress! in fear,
Dreading thine over-wrought mood,
What I knew, I conceal'd.

MEROPE.

Swear by the Gods henceforth to obey me!

THE CHORUS.

Unhappy one, what deed
Purposes thy despair?
I promise; but I fear.

MEROPE.

From the altar, the unaveng'd tomb,
Fetch me the sacrifice-axe! ——

[THE CHORUS *goes towards the tomb of* CRESPHONTES, *and their leader brings back the axe.*

O Husband, O cloth'd
With the grave's everlasting,
All-covering darkness! O King,
Well mourn'd, but ill-aveng'd!

Approv'st thou thy wife now ?——
The axe ! — who brings it ?

THE CHORUS.

'Tis here !
But thy gesture, thy look,
Appals me, shakes me with awe.

MEROPE.

Thrust back now the bolt of that door !

THE CHORUS.

Alas ! alas !—
Behold the fastenings withdrawn
Of the guest-chamber door !—
Ah ! I beseech thee—with tears——

MEROPE.

Throw the door open !

THE CHORUS.

'Tis done! . . .

[*The door of the house is thrown open: the interior of the guest-chamber is discovered, with* ÆPYTUS *asleep on a couch.*

MEROPE.

He sleeps—sleeps calm. O ye all-seeing Gods!
Thus peacefully do ye let sinners sleep,
While troubled innocents toss, and lie awake?
What sweeter sleep than this could I desire
For thee, my child, if thou wert yet alive?
How often have I dream'd of thee like this,
With thy soil'd hunting-coat, and sandals torn,
Asleep in the Arcadian glens at noon,
Thy head droop'd softly, and the golden curls
Clustering o'er thy white forehead, like a girl's;
The short proud lip showing thy race, thy cheeks
Brown'd with thine open-air, free, hunter's life.
Ah me! . . .
And where dost thou sleep now, my innocent boy?—
In some dark fir-tree's shadow, amid rocks
Untrodden, on Cyllene's desolate side;

Where travellers never pass, where only come
Wild beasts, and vultures sailing overhead.
There, there thou liest now, my hapless child!
Stretch'd among briars and stones, the slow, black gore
Oozing through thy soak'd hunting-shirt, with limbs
Yet stark from the death-struggle, tight-clench'd hands,
And eyeballs staring for revenge in vain.
Ah miserable! . . .
And thou, thou fair-skinn'd Serpent! thou art laid
In a rich chamber, on a happy bed,
In a king's house, thy victim's heritage;
And drink'st untroubled slumber, to sleep off
The toils of thy foul service, till thou wake
Refresh'd, and claim thy master's thanks and gold. —
Wake up in hell from thine unhallow'd sleep,
Thou smiling Fiend, and claim thy guerdon there!
Wake amid gloom, and howling, and the noise
Of sinners pinion'd on the torturing wheel,

And the stanch Furies' never-silent scourge.
And bid the chief-tormentors there provide
For a grand culprit shortly coming down.
Go thou the first, and usher in thy lord!
A more just stroke than that thou gav'st my son,
Take——

[MEROPE *advances towards the sleeping* ÆPYTUS, *with the axe uplifted. At the same moment* ARCAS *returns.*

ARCAS (*to the Chorus*).

Not with him to council did the King
Carry his messenger, but left him here.

[*Sees* MEROPE *and* ÆPYTUS.

O Gods! . . .

MEROPE.

Foolish old man, thou spoil'st my blow!

ARCAS.

What do I see? . . .

MEROPE.

A murderer at death's door.
Therefore no words!

ARCAS.

A murderer? . . .

MEROPE.

And a captive
To the dear next-of-kin of him he murder'd.
Stand, and let vengeance pass!

ARCAS.

Hold, O Queen, hold!
Thou know'st not whom thou strik'st. . . .

MEROPE.

I know his crime.

ARCAS.

Unhappy one! thou strik'st——

MEROPE.

A most just blow.

ARCAS.

No, by the Gods, thou slay'st——

MEROPE.

Stand off!

ARCAS.

Thy son!

MEROPE.

Ah! . . . . [*She lets the axe drop, and falls insensible.*

ÆPYTUS (*awaking*).

Who are these? What shrill, ear-piercing scream
Wakes me thus kindly from the perilous sleep
Wherewith fatigue and youth had bound mine eyes,
Even in the deadly palace of my foe? —
Arcas! Thou here?

ARCAS (*embracing him*).

O my dear master! O
My child, my charge belov'd, welcome to life!
As dead we held thee, mourn'd for thee as dead.

ÆPYTUS.

In word I died, that I in deed might live.
But who are these?

ARCAS.

Messenian maidens, friends.

ÆPYTUS.

And, Arcas!—but I tremble!

ARCAS.

Boldly ask.

ÆPYTUS.

That black-rob'd, swooning figure? . . .

ARCAS.

Merope.

ÆPYTUS.

O mother! mother!

MEROPE.

Who upbraids me? Ah! . . .

[*seeing the axe.*

ÆPYTUS.

Upbraids thee? no one.

MEROPE

Thou dost well: but take . . .

ÆPYTUS.

What wav'st thou off?

MEROPE.

That murderous axe away!

ÆPYTUS.

Thy son is here.

MEROPE.

One said so, sure, but now.

ÆPYTUS.

Here, here thou hast him!

MEROPE.

Slaughter'd by this hand!...

ÆPYTUS.

No, by the Gods, alive and like to live!

MEROPE.

What, thou?—I dream——

ÆPYTUS.

May'st thou dream ever so!

MEROPE (*advancing towards him*).

My child? unhurt? . . .

ÆPYTUS.

Only by over joy.

MEROPE.

Art thou, then, come? . . .

ÆPYTUS.

Never to part again.

[*They fall into one another's arms. Then* MEROPE, *holding* ÆPYTUS *by the hand, turns to* THE CHORUS.

MEROPE.

O kind Messenian maidens, O my friends,
Bear witness, see, mark well, on what a head
My first stroke of revenge had nearly fallen!

THE CHORUS.

We see, dear mistress: and we say, the Gods,
As hitherto they kept him, keep him now.

MEROPE.

O my son ! *str.*
I have, I have thee . . . . the years
Fly back, my child ! and thou seem'st
Ne'er to have gone from these eyes,
Never been torn from this breast.

ÆPYTUS.

Mother, my heart runs over : but the time
Presses me, chides me, will not let me weep.

MEROPE.

Fearest thou now ?

ÆPYTUS.

I fear not, but I think on my design.

MEROPE.

At the undried fount of this breast,
A babe, thou smilest again.

Thy brothers play at my feet,
Early-slain innocents ! near,
Thy kind-speaking father stands.

ÆPYTUS.

Remember, to revenge his death I come !

MEROPE.

Ah . . . revenge ! *ant.*
That word ! it kills me ! I see
Once more roll back on my house,
Never to ebb, the accurs'd
All-flooding ocean of blood.

ÆPYTUS.

Mother, sometimes the justice of the Gods
Appoints the way to peace through shedding blood.

MEROPE.

Sorrowful peace !

ÆPYTUS.

And yet the only peace to us allow'd.

MEROPE.

From the first-wrought vengeance is born
A long succession of crimes.
Fresh blood flows, calling for blood:
Fathers, sons, grandsons, are all
One death-dealing vengeful train.

ÆPYTUS.

Mother, thy fears are idle: for I come
To close an old wound, not to open new.
In all else willing to be taught, in this
Instruct me not; I have my lesson clear.—
Arcas, seek out my uncle Laias, now
Concerting in the city with our friends;
Here bring him, ere the king come back from council:
That, how to accomplish what the Gods enjoin,

And the slow-ripening time at last prepares,
We two with thee, my mother, may consult :
For whose help dare I count on if not thine ?

MEROPE.

Approves my brother Laias this design ?

ÆPYTUS.

Yes, and alone is with me here to share.

MEROPE.

And what of thine Arcadian mate, who bears
Suspicion from thy grandsire of thy death,
For whom, as I suppose, thou passest here ?

ÆPYTUS.

Sworn to our plot he is : but, that surmise
Fix'd him the author of my death, I knew not.

MEROPE.

Proof, not surmise, shows him in commerce close ——

ÆPYTUS.

With this Messenian tyrant — that I know.

MEROPE.

And entertain'st thou, child, such dangerous friends?

ÆPYTUS.

This commerce for my best behoof he plies.

MEROPE.

That thou may'st read thine enemy's counsel plain?

ÆPYTUS.

Too dear his secret wiles have cost our house.

MEROPE.

And of his unsure agent what demands he?

ÆPYTUS.

News of my business, pastime, temper, friends.

MEROPE.

His messages, then, point not to thy murder ?

ÆPYTUS.

Not yet ; though such, no doubt, his final aim.

MEROPE.

And what Arcadian helpers bring'st thou here ?

ÆPYTUS.

Laias alone ; no errand mine for crowds.

MEROPE.

On what relying, to crush such a foe ?

ÆPYTUS.

One sudden stroke, and the Messenians' love.

MEROPE.

O thou long-lost, long seen in dreams alone,
But now seen face to face, my only child !

Why wilt thou fly to lose as soon as found
My new-won treasure, thy beloved life ?
Or how expectest not to lose, who com'st
With such slight means to cope with such a foe ?
Thine enemy thou know'st not, nor his strength.
The stroke thou purposest is desperate, rash —
Yet grant that it succeeds ;—thou hast behind
The stricken king a second enemy
Scarce dangerous less than him, the Dorian lords.
These are not now the savage band who erst
Follow'd thy father from their northern hills,
Mere ruthless and uncounsell'd tools of war,
Good to obey, without a leader nought.
Their chief hath train'd them, made them like himself,
Sagacious, men of iron, watchful, firm,
Against surprise and sudden panic proof :
Their master fall'n, these will not flinch, but band
To keep their master's power : thou wilt find
Behind his corpse their hedge of serried spears.

But, to match these, thou hast the people's love ?
On what a reed, my child, thou leanest there !
Knowest thou not how timorous, how unsure,
How useless an ally a people is
Against the one and certain arm of power ?
Thy father perish'd in this people's cause,
Perish'd before their eyes, yet no man stirr'd :
For years, his widow, in their sight I stand,
A never-changing index to revenge —
What help, what vengeance, at their hands have I ?—
At least, if thou wilt trust them, try them first :
Against the King himself array the host
Thou countest on to back thee 'gainst his lords :
First rally the Messenians to thy cause,
Give them cohesion, purpose, and resolve,
Marshal them to an army — then advance,
Then try the issue ; and not, rushing on
Single and friendless, throw to certain death
That dear-belov'd, that young, that gracious head.
Be guided, O my son ! spurn counsel not :

For know thou this, a violent heart hath been
Fatal to all the race of Hercules.

THE CHORUS.

With sage experience she speaks ; and thou,
O Æpytus, weigh well her counsel given.

ÆPYTUS.

Ill counsel, in my judgment, gives she here,
Maidens, and reads experience much amiss;
Discrediting the succour which our cause
Might from the people draw, if rightly us'd :
Advising us a course which would, indeed,
If followed, make their succour slack and null.
A people is no army, train'd to fight,
A passive engine, at their general's will;
And, if so us'd, proves, as thou say'st, unsure.
A people, like a common man, is dull,
Is lifeless, while its heart remains untouch'd ;
A fool can drive it, and a fly may scare :

When it admires and loves, its heart awakes ;
Then irresistibly it lives, it works :
A people, then, is an ally indeed ;
It is ten thousand fiery wills in one.
Now I, if I invite them to run risk
Of life for my advantage, and myself,
Who chiefly profit, run no more than they —
How shall I rouse their love, their ardour so ?
But, if some signal, unassisted stroke,
Dealt at my own sole risk, before their eyes,
Announces me their rightful prince return'd —
The undegenerate blood of Hercules —
The daring claimant of a perilous throne —
How might not such a sight as this revive
Their loyal passion tow'rd my father's house ?
Electrify their hearts ? make them no more
A craven mob, but a devouring fire ?
Then might I use them, then, for one who thus
Spares not himself, themselves they will not spare.

Haply, had but one daring soul stood forth
To rally them and lead them to revenge,
When my great father fell, they had replied: —
Alas! our foe alone stood forward then.
And thou, my mother, hadst thou made a sign —
Hadst thou, from thy forlorn and captive state
Of widowhood in these polluted halls,
Thy prison-house, rais'd one imploring cry —
Who knows but that avengers thou hadst found?
But mute thou sat'st, and each Messenian heart
In thy despondency desponded too.
Enough of this! — though not a finger stir
To succour me in my extremest need;
Though all free spirits in this land be dead,
And only slaves and tyrants left alive —
Yet for me, mother, I had liefer die
On native ground, than drag the tedious hours
Of a protected exile any more.
Hate, duty, interest, passion call one way:
Here stand I now, and the attempt shall be.

THE CHORUS.

Prudence is on the other side; but deeds
Condemn'd by prudence have sometimes gone well.

MEROPE.

Not till the ways of prudence all are tried,
And tried in vain, the turn of rashness comes.
Thou leapest to thy deed, and hast not ask'd
Thy kinsfolk and thy father's friends for aid.

ÆPYTUS.

And to what friends should I for aid apply?

MEROPE.

The royal race of Temenus, in Argos——

ÆPYTUS.

That house, like ours, intestine murder maims.

MEROPE.

Thy Spartan cousins, Procles and his brother——

ÆPYTUS.

Love a won cause, but not a cause to win.

MEROPE.

My father, then, and his Arcadian chiefs——

ÆPYTUS.

Mean still to keep aloof from Dorian broil.

MEROPE.

Wait, then, until sufficient help appears.

ÆPYTUS.

Orestes in Mycenæ had no more.

MEROPE.

He to fulfil an order rais'd his hand.

ÆPYTUS.

What order more precise had he than I?

MEROPE.

Apollo peal'd it from his Delphian cave.

ÆPYTUS.

A mother's murder needed hest divine.

MEROPE.

He had a hest, at least, and thou hast none.

ÆPYTUS.

The Gods command not where the heart speaks clear.

MEROPE.

Thou wilt destroy, I see, thyself and us.

ÆPYTUS.

O suffering! O calamity! how ten,
How twentyfold worse are ye, when your blows
Not only wound the sense, but kill the soul,
The noble thought, which is alone the man!

That I, to-day returning, find myself
Orphan'd of both my parents — by his foes
My father, by your strokes my mother slain !—
For this is not my mother, who dissuades,
At the dread altar of her husband's tomb,
His son from vengeance on his murderer;
And not alone dissuades him, but compares
His just revenge to an unnatural deed,
A deed so awful, that the general tongue
Fluent of horrors, falters to relate it —
Of darkness so tremendous, that its author,
Though to his act empower'd, nay, impell'd,
By the oracular sentence of the Gods,
Fled, for years after, o'er the face of earth,
A frenzied wanderer, a God-driven man,
And hardly yet, some say, hath found a grave —
With such a deed as *this* thou matchest mine,
Which Nature sanctions, which the innocent blood
Clamours to find fulfill'd, which good men praise,
And only bad men joy to see undone ?

O honour'd father ! hide thee in thy grave
Deep as thou canst, for hence no succour comes;
Since from thy faithful subjects what revenge
Canst thou expect, when thus thy widow fails?
Alas ! an adamantine strength indeed,
Past expectation, hath thy murderer built :
For this is the true strength of guilty kings,
When they corrupt the souls of those they rule.

THE CHORUS.

Zeal makes him most unjust : but, in good time,
Here, as I guess, the noble Laias comes.

LAIAS.

Break off, break off your talking, and depart
Each to his post, where the occasion calls ;
Lest from the council-chamber presently
The King return, and find you prating here.
A time will come for greetings ; but to-day
The hour for words is gone, is come for deeds.

ÆPYTUS.

O princely Laias ! to what purpose calls
The occasion, if our chief confederate fails ?
My mother stands aloof, and blames our deed.

LAIAS.

My royal sister ? . . . but, without some cause,
I know, she honours not the dead so ill.

MEROPE.

Brother, it seems thy sister must present,
At this first meeting after absence long,
Not welcome, exculpation to her kin :
Yet exculpation needs it, if I seek,
A woman and a mother, to avert
Risk from my new-restor'd, my only son ?—
Sometimes, when he was gone, I wish'd him back,
Risk what he might ; now that I have him here,
Now that I feed mine eyes on that young face,
Hear that fresh voice, and clasp that gold-lock'd head,

I shudder, Laias, to commit my child
To Murder's dread arena, where I saw
His father and his ill-starr'd brethren fall :
I loathe for him the slippery way of blood ;
I ask if bloodless means may gain his end.
In me the fever of revengeful hate,
Passion's first furious longing to imbrue
Our own right hand in the detested blood
Of enemies, and count their dying groans —
If in this feeble bosom such a fire
Did ever burn — is long by time allay'd,
And I would now have Justice strike, not me.
Besides — for from my brother and my son
I hide not even this — the reverence deep,
Remorseful, tow'rd my hostile solitude,
By Polyphontes never fail'd-in once
Through twenty years ; his mournful anxious zeal
To efface in me the memory of his crime —
Though it efface not that, yet makes me wish
His death a public, not a personal act,

Treacherously plotted 'twixt my son and me ;
To whom this day he came to proffer peace,
Treaty, and to this kingdom for my son
Heirship, with fair intent, as I believe :—
For that he plots thy death, account it false ;

[*to* Æpytus.

Number it with the thousand rumours vain,
Figments of plots, wherewith intriguers fill
The enforced leisure of an exile's ear :—
Immers'd in serious state-craft is the King,
Bent above all to pacify, to rule,
Rigidly, yet in settled calm, this realm ;
Not prone, all say, to useless bloodshed now. —
So much is due to truth, even tow'rds our foe.

[*to* Laias.

Do I, then, give to usurpation grace,
And from his natural rights my son debar ?
Not so : let him — and none shall be more prompt
Than I to help — raise his Messenian friends ;
Let him fetch succours from Arcadia, gain

His Argive or his Spartan cousins' aid ;
Let him do this, do aught but recommence
Murder's uncertain, secret, perilous game —
And I, when to his righteous standard down
Flies Victory wing'd, and Justice raises *then*
Her sword, will be the first to bid it fall.
If, haply, at this moment, such attempt
Promise not fair, let him a little while
Have faith, and trust the future and the Gods.
He may — for never did the Gods allow
Fast permanence to an ill-gotten throne.—
These are but woman's words ; — yet, Laias, thou
Despise them not ! for, brother, thou, like me,
Wert not among the feuds of warrior-chiefs,
Each sovereign for his dear-bought hour, born ;
But in the pastoral Arcadia rear'd,
With Cypselus our father, where we saw
The simple patriarchal state of kings,
Where sire to son transmits the unquestion'd crown,
Unhack'd, unsmirch'd, unbloodied, and hast learnt

That spotless hands unshaken sceptres hold.
Having learnt this, then, use thy knowledge now.

THE CHORUS.

Which way to lean I know not : bloody strokes
Are never free from doubt, though sometimes due.

LAIAS.

O Merope, the common heart of man
Agrees to deem some deeds so horrible,
That neither gratitude, nor tie of race,
Womanly pity, nor maternal fear,
Nor any pleader else, shall be indulg'd
To breathe a syllable to bar revenge.
All this, no doubt, thou to thyself hast urg'd —
Time presses, so that theme forbear I now :
Direct to thy dissuasions I reply.
Blood-founded thrones, thou say'st, are insecure;
Our father's kingdom, because pure, is safe.
True; but what cause to our Arcadia gives

Its privileg'd immunity from blood,
But that, since first the black and fruitful Earth
In the primeval mountain-forests bore
Pelasgus, our forefather and mankind's,
Legitimately sire to son, with us,
Bequeaths the allegiance of our shepherd-tribes,
More loyal, as our line continues more?—
How can your Heracleidan chiefs inspire
This awe which guards our earth-sprung, lineal kings?
What permanence, what stability like ours,
Whether blood flows or no, can yet invest
The broken order of your Dorian thrones,
Fix'd yesterday, and ten times chang'd since then?—
Two brothers, and their orphan nephews, strove
For the three conquer'd kingdoms of this isle:
The eldest, mightiest brother, Temenus, took
Argos: a juggle to Cresphontes gave
Messenia: to those helpless Boys, the lot
Worst of the three, the stony Sparta, fell.
August, indeed, was the foundation here!

What followed? — His most trusted kinsman slew
Cresphontes in Messenia; Temenus
Perish'd in Argos by his jealous sons;
The Spartan Brothers with their guardian strive:—
Can houses thus ill-seated — thus embroil'd —
Thus little founded in their subjects' love,
Practise the indulgent, bloodless policy
Of dynasties long-fix'd, and honour'd long?
No! Vigour and severity must chain
Popular reverence to these recent lines;
If their first-founded order be maintain'd —
Their murder'd rulers terribly aveng'd —
Ruthlessly their rebellious subjects crush'd.—
Since policy bids thus, what fouler death
Than thine illustrious husband's to avenge
Shall we select? — than Polyphontes, what
More daring and more grand offender find?
Justice, my sister, long demands this blow,
And Wisdom, now thou see'st, demands it too:
To strike it, then, dissuade thy son no more;

For to live disobedient to these two,
Justice and Wisdom, is no life at all.

THE CHORUS.

The Gods, O mistress dear! the hard-soul'd man,
Who spar'd not others, bid not us to spare.

MEROPE.

Alas! against my brother, son, and friends,
One, and a woman, how can I prevail?—
O brother! thou hast conquer'd; yet, I fear. . . .
Son! with a doubting heart thy mother yields . . .
May it turn happier than my doubts portend!

LAIAS.

Meantime on thee the task of silence only
Shall be impos'd; to us shall be the deed.
Now, not another word, but to our act!
Nephew! thy friends are sounded, and prove true:
Thy father's murderer, in the public place,

Performs, this noon, a solemn sacrifice:
Go with him—choose the moment—strike thy blow!
If prudence counsels thee to go unarm'd,
The sacrificer's axe will serve thy turn.
To me and the Messenians leave the rest,
With the Gods' aid—and, if they give but aid
As our just cause deserves, I do not fear.

[ÆPYTUS, LAIAS, *and* ARCAS, *go out.*

THE CHORUS.

O Son and Mother, *str.* 1.
Whom the Gods o'ershadow,
In dangerous trial,
With certainty of favour!
As erst they shadow'd
Your race's founders
From irretrievable woe:
When the seed of Lycaon
Lay forlorn, lay outcast,
Callisto and her Boy.

What deep-grass'd meadow *ant.* 1.
At the meeting valleys—
Where clear-flowing Ladon,
Most beautiful of waters,
Receives the river
Whose trout are vocal,
The Aroanian stream—
Without home, without mother,
Hid the babe, hid Arcas,
The nursling of the dells?

But the sweet-smelling myrtle, *str.* 2.
And the pink-flower'd oleander,
And the green agnus-castus,
To the West-Wind's murmur,
Rustled round his cradle;
And Maia rear'd him.
Then, a boy, he startled
In the snow-fill'd hollows
Of high Cyllene

The white mountain-birds;
Or surpris'd, in the glens,
The basking tortoises,
Whose strip'd shell founded
In the hand of Hermes
The glory of the lyre.

But his mother, Callisto, *ant.* 2.
In her hiding-place of the thickets
Of the lentisk and ilex,
In her rough form, fearing
The hunter on the outlook,
Poor changeling! trembled.
Or the children, plucking
In the thorn-chok'd gullies
Wild gooseberries, scar'd her,
The shy mountain-bear.
Or the shepherds, on slopes
With pale-spik'd lavender
And crisp thyme tufted,

Came upon her, stealing
At day-break through the dew.

Once, 'mid the gorges, *str.* 3.
Spray-drizzled, lonely,
Unclimb'd by man —
O'er whose cliffs the townsmen
Of crag-perch'd Nonacris
Behold in summer
The slender torrent
Of Styx come dancing,
A wind-blown thread —
By the precipices of Khelmos,
The fleet, desperate hunter,
The youthful Arcas, born of Zeus,
His fleeing mother,
Transform'd Callisto,
Unwitting follow'd —
And rais'd his spear.

Turning, with piteous *ant.* 3.
Distressful longing,
Sad, eager eyes,
Mutely she regarded
Her well-known enemy.
Low moans half utter'd
What speech refus'd her ;
Tears cours'd, tears human,
Down those disfigur'd
Once human cheeks.
With unutterable foreboding
Her son, heart-stricken, ey'd her.
The Gods had pity, made them Stars.
Stars now they sparkle
In the northern Heaven ;
The guard Arcturus,
The guard-watch'd Bear.

So, o'er thee and thy child, *epode.*
Some God, Merope, now,

In dangerous hour, stretches his hand.
So, like a star, dawns thy son,
Radiant with fortune and joy.

[POLYPHONTES *comes in.*

POLYPHONTES.

O Merope, the trouble on thy face
Tells me enough thou know'st the news which all
Messenia speaks : the prince, thy son, is dead.
Not from my lips should consolation fall :
To offer that, I came not ; but to urge,
Even after news of this sad death, our league.
Yes, once again I come ; I will not take
This morning's angry answer for thy last :
To the Messenian kingdom thou and I
Are the sole claimants left ; what cause of strife
Lay in thy son is buried in his grave.
Most honourably I meant, I call the Gods
To witness, offering him return and power :
Yet, had he liv'd, suspicion, jealousy,

Inevitably had surg'd up, perhaps,
'Twixt thee and me ; suspicion, that I nurs'd
Some ill design against him ; jealousy,
That he enjoy'd but part, being heir to all.
And he himself, with the impetuous heart
Of youth, 'tis like, had never quite foregone
The thought of vengeance on me, never quite
Unclos'd his itching fingers from his sword.
But thou, O Merope, though deeply wrong'd,
Though injur'd past forgiveness, as men deem,
Yet hast been long at school with thoughtful Time,
And from that teacher may'st have learn'd, like me,
That all may be endur'd, and all forgiv'n ;
Have learn'd that we must sacrifice the thirst
Of personal vengeance to the public weal ;
Have learn'd, that there are guilty deeds, which leave
The hand that does them guiltless ; in a word,
That kings live for their peoples, not themselves.
This having learn'd, let us a union found
(For the last time I ask, ask earnestly)

Bas'd on pure public welfare ; let us be —
Not Merope and Polyphontes, foes
Blood-sever'd — but Messenia's King and Queen :
Let us forget ourselves for those we rule.
Speak : I go hence to offer sacrifice
To the Preserver Zeus ; let me return
Thanks to him for our amity as well.

MEROPE.

Oh had'st thou, Polyphontes, still but kept
The silence thou hast kept for twenty years !

POLYPHONTES.

Henceforth, if what I urge displease, I may :
But fair proposal merits fair reply.

MEROPE.

And thou shalt have it ! Yes, because thou *hast*
For twenty years forborne to interrupt
The solitude of her whom thou hast wrong'd —

That scanty grace shall earn thee this reply. —
First, for our union. Trust me, 'twixt us two
The brazen-footed Fury ever stalks,
Waving her hundred hands, a torch in each,
Aglow with angry fire, to keep us twain.
Now, for thyself. Thou com'st with well-cloak'd joy,
To announce the ruin of my husband's house,
To sound thy triumph in his widow's ears,
To bid her share thine unendanger'd throne : —
To this thou would'st have answer.—Take it : Fly !
Cut short thy triumph, seeming at its height ;
Fling off thy crown, suppos'd at last secure ;
Forsake this ample, proud Messenian realm :
To some small, humble, and unnoted strand,
Some rock more lonely than that Lemnian isle
Where Philoctetes pin'd, take ship and flee :
Some solitude more inaccessible
Than the ice-bastion'd Caucasean Mount,
Chosen a prison for Prometheus, climb :
There in unvoic'd oblivion hide thy name,

And bid the sun, thine only visitant,
Divulge not to the far-off world of men
What once-fam'd wretch he hath seen lurking there.
There nurse a late remorse, and thank the Gods,
And thank thy bitterest foe, that, having lost
All things but life, thou lose not life as well.

POLYPHONTES.

What mad bewilderment of grief is this?

MEROPE.

Thou art bewilder'd: the sane head is mine.

POLYPHONTES.

I pity thee, and wish thee calmer mind.

MEROPE.

Pity thyself; none needs compassion more.

POLYPHONTES.

Yet, oh! could'st thou but act as reason bids!

MEROPE.

And in my turn I wish the same for thee.

POLYPHONTES.

All I could do to soothe thee has been tried.

MEROPE.

For that, in this my warning, thou art paid.

POLYPHONTES.

Know'st thou then aught, that thus thou sound'st the alarm ?

MEROPE.

Thy crime: that were enough to make one fear.

POLYPHONTES.

My deed is of old date, and long aton'd.

MEROPE.

Aton'd this very day, perhaps, it is.

POLYPHONTES.

My final victory proves the Gods appeas'd.

MEROPE.

O victor, victor, trip not at the goal!

POLYPHONTES.

Hatred and passionate Envy blind thine eyes.

MEROPE.

O Heaven-abandon'd wretch, that envies thee!

POLYPHONTES.

Thou hold'st so cheap, then, the Messenian crown?

MEROPE.

I think on what the future hath in store.

POLYPHONTES.

To-day I reign: the rest I leave to Fate.

MEROPE.

For Fate thou wait'st not long; since, in this hour——

POLYPHONTES.

What? for so far she hath not prov'd my foe—

MEROPE.

Fate seals my lips, and drags to ruin thee.

POLYPHONTES.

Enough! enough! I will no longer hear
The ill-boding note which frantic Envy sounds
To affright a fortune which the Gods secure.
Once more my friendship thou rejectest: well!
More for this land's sake grieve I, than mine own.
I chafe not with thee, that thy hate endures,
Nor bend myself too low, to make it yield.
What I have done is done; by my own deed,
Neither exulting nor asham'd, I stand.
Why should this heart of mine set mighty store

By the construction and report of men?
Not men's good-word hath made me what I am.
Alone I master'd power; and alone,
Since so thou wilt, I will maintain it still.

[POLYPHONTES *goes out.*

THE CHORUS.

Did I then waver *str.* 1.
(O woman's judgment!)
Misled by seeming
Success of crime?
And ask, if sometimes
The Gods, perhaps, allow'd you,
O lawless daring of the strong,
O self-will recklessly indulg'd?

Not time, not lightning, *ant.* 1
Not rain, not thunder,
Efface the endless
Decrees of Heaven.

Make Justice alter,
Revoke, assuage her sentence,
Which dooms dread ends to dreadful deeds,
And violent deaths to violent men.

But the signal example *str.* 2.
Of invariableness of justice
Our glorious founder
Hercules gave us,
Son lov'd of Zeus his father: for he err'd,

And the strand of Eubœa, *ant.* 2.
And the promontory of Cenæum,
His painful, solemn
Punishment witness'd,
Beheld his expiation: for he died.

O villages of Œta *str.* 3.
With hedges of the wild rose!
O pastures of the mountain,

Of short grass, beaded with dew,
Between the pine-woods and the cliffs!
O cliffs, left by the eagles,
On that morn, when the smoke-cloud
From the oak-built, fiercely-burning pyre,
Up the precipices of Trachis,
Drove them screaming from their eyries!
A willing, a willing sacrifice on that day
Ye witness'd, ye mountain lawns,
When the shirt-wrapt, poison-blister'd Hero
Ascended, with undaunted heart,
Living, his own funeral-pile,
And stood, shouting for a fiery torch;
And the kind, chance-arriv'd Wanderer,
The inheritor of the bow,
Coming swiftly through the sad Trachinians,
Put the torch to the pile:
That the flame tower'd on high to the Heaven;
Bearing with it, to Olympus,
To the side of Hebe,

To immortal delight,
The labour-releas'd Hero.

O heritage of Neleus, *ant.* 3.
Ill-kept by his infirm heirs!
O kingdom of Messenê,
Of rich soil, chosen by craft,
Possess'd in hatred, lost in blood!
O town, high Stenyclaros,
With new walls, which the victors
From the four-town'd, mountain-shadow'd Doris,
For their Hercules-issu'd princes
Built in strength against the vanquish'd!
Another, another sacrifice on this day
Ye witness, ye new-built towers!
When the white-rob'd, garland-crowned Monarch
Approaches, with undoubting heart,
Living, his own sacrifice-block,
And stands, shouting for a slaughterous axe;
And the stern, Destiny-brought Stranger,
The inheritor of the realm,

Coming swiftly through the jocund Dorians,
Drives the axe to its goal:
That the blood rushes in streams to the dust;
Bearing with it, to Erinnys,
To the Gods of Hades,
To the dead unaveng'd,
The fiercely-requir'd Victim.

Knowing he did it, unknowing pays for it. [*epode.*
Unknowing, unknowing,
Thinking aton'd-for
Deeds unatonable,
Thinking appeas'd
Gods unappeasable,
Lo, the Ill-fated One,
Standing for harbour,
Right at the harbour-mouth,
Strikes, with all sail set,
Full on the sharp-pointed
Needle of ruin!

[*A* MESSENGER *comes in.*

MESSENGER.

O honour'd Queen, O faithful followers
Of your dead master's line, I bring you news
To make the gates of this long-mournful house
Leap, and fly open of themselves for joy!

[*noise and shouting heard.*

Hark how the shouting crowds tramp hitherward
With glad acclaim! Ere they forestall my news,
Accept it:—Polyphontes is no more.

MEROPE.

Is my son safe? that question bounds my care.

MESSENGER.

He is, and by the people hail'd for king.

MEROPE.

The rest to me is little: yet, since that
Must from some mouth be heard, relate it thou.

MESSENGER.

Not little, if thou saw'st what love, what zeal,
At thy dead husband's name the people show.
For when this morning in the public square
I took my stand, and saw the unarm'd crowds
Of citizens in holiday attire,
Women and children intermix'd; and then,
Group'd around Zeus's altar, all in arms,
Serried and grim, the ring of Dorian lords—
I trembled for our prince and his attempt.
Silence and expectation held us all:
Till presently the King came forth, in robe
Of sacrifice, his guards clearing the way
Before him—at his side, the prince, thy son,
Unarm'd and travel-soil'd, just as he was:
With him conferring the King slowly reach'd
The altar in the middle of the square,
Where, by the sacrificing minister,
The flower-dress'd victim stood, a milk-white bull,
Swaying from side to side his massy head

With short impatient lowings : there he stopp'd,
And seem'd to muse awhile, then rais'd his eyes
To Heaven, and laid his hand upon the steer,
And cried — *O Zeus, let what blood-guiltiness*
Yet stains our land be by this blood wash'd out,
And grant henceforth to the Messenians peace!
That moment, while with upturn'd eyes he pray'd,
The prince snatch'd from the sacrificer's hand
The axe, and on the forehead of the King,
Where twines the chaplet, dealt a mighty blow
Which fell'd him to the earth, and o'er him stood,
And shouted — *Since by thee defilement came,*
What blood so meet as thine to wash it out?
What hand to strike thee meet as mine, the hand
Of Æpytus, thy murder'd master's son?—
But, gazing at him from the ground, the King . . .
Is it, then, thou? he murmur'd; and with that,
He bow'd his head, and deeply groan'd, and died.
Till then we all seem'd stone : but then a cry
Broke from the Dorian lords : forward they rush'd

To circle the prince round: when suddenly
Laias in arms sprang to his nephew's side,
Crying — *O ye Messenians, will ye leave*
The son to perish as ye left the sire?
And from that moment I saw nothing clear:
For from all sides a deluge, as it seem'd,
Burst o'er the altar and the Dorian lords,
Of holiday-clad citizens transform'd
To armed warriors: I heard vengeful cries;
I heard the clash of weapons; then I saw
The Dorians lying dead, thy son hail'd king.
And, truly, one who sees, what seem'd so strong,
The power of this tyrant and his lords,
Melt like a passing smoke, a nightly dream,
At one bold word, one enterprising blow —
Might ask, why we endur'd their yoke so long:
But that we know how every perilous feat
Of daring, easy as it seems when done,
Is easy at no moment but the right.

THE CHORUS.

Thou speakest well ; but here, to give our eyes
Authentic proof of what thou tell'st our ears,
The conquerors, with the King's dead body, come.

[ÆPYTUS, LAIAS, *and* ARCAS *come in with the dead body of* POLYPHONTES, *followed by a crowd of the* MESSENIANS.]

LAIAS.

Sister, from this day forth thou art no more
The widow of a husband unaveng'd,
The anxious mother of an exil'd son.
Thine enemy is slain, thy son is king !
Rejoice with us ! and trust me, he who wish'd
Welfare to the Messenian state, and calm,
Could find no way to found them sure as this.

ÆPYTUS.

Mother, all these approve me : but if thou
Approve not too, I have but half my joy.

MEROPE.

O Æpytus, my son, behold, behold
This iron man, my enemy and thine,
This politic sovereign, lying at our feet,
With blood-bespatter'd robes, and chaplet shorn !
Inscrutable as ever, see, it keeps
Its sombre aspect of majestic care,
Of solitary thought, unshar'd resolve,
Even in death, that countenance austere.
So look'd he, when to Stenyclaros first,
A new-made wife, I from Arcadia came,
And found him at my husband's side, his friend,
His kinsman, his right hand in peace and war ;
Unsparing in his service of his toil,
His blood ; to me, for I confess it, kind :
So look'd he in that dreadful day of death :
So, when he pleaded for our league but now.
What meantest thou, O Polyphontes, what
Desired'st thou, what truly spurr'd thee on ?
Was policy of state, the ascendancy

Of the Heracleidan conquerors, as thou said'st,
Indeed thy lifelong passion and sole aim ?
Or did'st thou but, as cautious schemers use,
Cloak thine ambition with these specious words ?
I know not ; just, in either case, the stroke
Which laid thee low, for blood requires blood :
But yet, not knowing this, I triumph not
Over thy corpse, triumph not, neither mourn ;
For I find worth in thee, and badness too.
What mood of spirit, therefore, shall we call
The true one of a man—what way of life
His fix'd condition and perpetual walk ?
None, since a twofold colour reigns in all.
But thou, my son, study to make prevail
One colour in thy life, the hue of truth :
That Justice, that sage Order, not alone
Natural Vengeance, may maintain thine act,
And make it stand indeed the will of Heaven.
Thy father's passion was this people's ease,
This people's anarchy, thy foe's pretence ;

As the chiefs rule, indeed, the people are :
Unhappy people, where the chiefs themselves
Are, like the mob, vicious and ignorant !
So rule, that even thine enemies may fail
To find in thee a fault whereon to found,
Of tyrannous harshness, or remissness weak :
So rule, that as thy father thou be lov'd ;
So rule, that as thy foe thou be obey'd.
Take these, my son, over thine enemy's corpse
Thy mother's prayers : and this prayer last of all,
That even in thy victory thou show,
Mortal, the moderation of a man.

ÆPYTUS.

O mother, my best diligence shall be
In all by thy experience to be rul'd
Where my own youth falls short. But, Laias, now,
First work after such victory, let us go
To render to my true Messenians thanks,
To the Gods grateful sacrifice ; and then,
Assume the ensigns of my father's power.

THE CHORUS.

Son of Cresphontes, past what perils
Com'st thou, guided safe, to thy home!
What things daring! what enduring!
And all this by the will of the Gods.

THE END.

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